Tracking Wise Attitude (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 54:42

So this morning we're moving into a realm that I particularly like working with: the heart-mind.

So far in the morning workshops we've mainly been exploring the first satipaṭṭhāna, the body, the first foundation of mindfulness. This is of course the realm of physical experience and sensory experience—the elements, the breathing, the flow of sensory objects as we move around the hall or open up our awareness to an open, radar-like awareness.

This morning we're going to start our exploration of the third satipaṭṭhāna, the realm of the heart-mind. This is cittānupassanā, tracking the citta, which is most often translated as "mind." But I prefer the translation "heart-mind" because the two—heart and mind—are very much connected experientially. We often find that when we're working with one, we're working with the other.

The citta, the heart-mind, is another domain of experience that the Buddha directs us to for cultivating mindfulness. As I mentioned, it's one of the four foundations of mindfulness, one of the four satipaṭṭhānas suggested in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the seminal instruction given by the Buddha for cultivating mindfulness for insight.

The realm of the heart is about feeling or affective experience. We've already been talking a little on the retreat about craving, aversion, and clinging. These are three movements that the heart makes, three feelings of the heart. As well, there are wholesome feelings like the brahmavihāras: love, compassion, joy, equanimity. The realm of the mind is our cognition and our knowing of experience—creating meaning out of our experience through perception, thinking, and so on.

But in our experience, these two—the heart and the mind—are interwoven and interdependent. When we feel an emotion, it has a strong affective feeling to it, a strong feeling of the heart, but it also involves thought and perception and identification. Tuning into the dynamic movements of the heart-mind is helpful for a few reasons.

Firstly, the heart-mind tends to be the cause of what we perceive as problems in the meditation. The nature of the heart is to feel, and perhaps you can identify with the way that feelings sometimes seem to stubbornly get in the way of a blissful or tranquil meditation experience. "If only this emotion would stop ambushing me, then I could settle down and practice properly." And the nature of the mind is to think, which we all tend to find just a touch inconvenient when we sit down to meditate.

Neither feeling nor thinking are actually problems at all, of course. They're natural functions of the heart and the mind, and they're precious opportunities to develop awareness and wisdom. But if we're not

willing or able to work with the heart-mind in the practice, then we experience them as problems, as distractions, as obstacles.

If we don't work with the heart-mind, then we can't fully understand our experience, because body, heart, and mind all feed and co-create each other. Unless we can be aware of them all, we're oblivious to this interaction. We're not seeing how one thing causes and conditions another.

To use the example of working with pain: if we're only focused on the physical sensations in the body and we can't see the aversion that's arising in the heart-mind, then we won't fully understand how the phenomenon of pain operates. The experience of pain is an interplay between the physical sensations, a feeling of dislike and resistance which arises in the heart, and then the perceptions and concepts and thoughts that go on in the mind. The aversion comes from the heart-mind, and this is what makes the experience painful. The physical sensations are the first arrow of painful feeling, and our reaction to the pain, which happens in the heart-mind, is the second arrow—and that's the one that creates the suffering.

Focusing on the heart-mind allows us to see dependent arising, how one thing conditions and is dependent upon another. Tuning into the heart-mind also refocuses the lens from what we could call object-focused meditation—focusing the attention on an object out there, either something chosen or something that just arises in our experience, a sound, a sensation—to subject-focused meditation. From meditation objects out there to the one who is meditating, the meditating heart-mind.

This is an important shift because in meditation this is where we usually identify the self. "I'm the one who is meditating. I'm the one who's aware." If we begin to investigate the one who is meditating, we may begin to unravel this persistent misconception that there is in fact a "me" doing this meditation.

The self is a product of mental activity and feeling. The heart-mind constructs the self through perceiving, thinking, cognizing, clinging, and so on. If we can make those activities, those processes, the objects of our meditation, then we can watch the self in process, in action. And when we bring our awareness to it, that's when it begins to dissolve.

We'll explore various ways of working with the heart-mind over the coming mornings in the practice workshops. This morning, we're picking up on a theme that is really central in natural awareness because it helps us to refine wise effort, which I talked about on the first day, I think it was. It's really central to this approach: refining the effort and energy that we're putting into the practice.

What we're going to look at today is cultivating wise attitude in the meditating heart-mind. It's about checking the heart-mind's feeling about the meditation practice—checking whether we're meditating with a heart that's balanced and open and accepting, or one that's tense, judgmental, dissatisfied with the quality of my meditation. Am I wanting something to happen or wanting something not to happen? Is the heart-mind content to simply be aware of what's happening now, or is it straining or striving to get to a better quality meditation experience?

Very often when we check in with the heart-mind, the answer to these questions is yes. It turns out that when we look, we find that our meditation tends to be driven by craving and aversion, much like everything else in our lives. Meditation can easily become just another way to ingrain the deep habits of striving to achieve and constructing a sense of self.

When we look for attitude in the meditating heart-mind—and soon we'll look at how we do that—we may well find one of three unskillful attitudes: craving, aversion, or delusion.

We might find an attitude of craving—wanting something to happen, trying to manufacture an experience, trying to recreate a good sit, or a feeling of striving. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Or we may find aversion—disliking an experience, wanting it to go away, a sense of dissatisfaction, self-judgment. Is it possible you've had a moment or two of this in the past few days?

Or we may find an attitude of delusion—confusion about what we're doing or what is going on, spacing out or getting caught up in concepts, thinking about the practice. Perhaps something that resonates.

But a fourth possibility—and no doubt you have also had this experience in the past few days—is that when we feel into the heart-mind, we find wise attitude. We find an openness to whatever is arising now, a sense of okayness about the present experience, a sense of no problem, no preference. We find a sense of well-being, peace, pleasure, contentment, ease, joy. These are equally important to get to know, to notice, indeed to savour.

Before we do a little experimental exercise to play around with this idea of attitude in the heart-mind, let me clarify something about this term "heart-mind." When I say heart-mind, I'm not referring to physical locations in the body. We're talking about qualities of our experience. The heart is often associated with the physical heart area, but what it refers to is the feeling aspect of experience—how we feel things like liking something, wanting something, disliking something, pushing it away. We also feel equanimity, pleasure, contentment. These feeling qualities are what we mean when we talk about the heart.

Similarly with the mind—in our culture we often associate this with the head, but we're talking about qualities of experience which we can get in touch with as activities or things that are happening, things like thinking or perceiving or being aware. Although these have associations with places in the body, it's actually important to set that aside because what we're going for, as we've been discussing throughout this retreat, is direct experience. Having a fixed idea that thinking happens in the head and feeling happens in the heart may actually limit your connection to experience, because you might find something completely unexpected about where these experiences seem to be playing out.

So let us do a little exercise to feel into our citta, our heart-mind. First, get into a comfortable and relaxed posture.

Looking for heart-mind is about tuning into the mind state of the one who is meditating. This might be a

background feeling of contentment or agitation or tension that becomes apparent if we ask ourselves something like, "How am I feeling about the meditation?" or "What is my mind state right now?"

Because body and mind are intimately interconnected, it might be that what arises when you ask yourself such a question is a physical sensation somewhere in the body. You might notice a tightness in the chest or a pressure behind the eyes, or maybe a warmth in the heart area or a sense of spaciousness. These are signs of your mind state. It doesn't mean you've failed to find mind state because you asked this question and what came up was physical sensation. This is where you can bring in the qualities of investigation and curiosity. "That's interesting—I'm trying to find the attitude I have towards the meditation right now, and what comes up is this sense of tightness in the chest. What can that tell me? Can I hang out with this sense of tightness for a while and see what it reveals?"

Another sign of mind state that might be easy to notice is the type of thought we are having. If you catch yourself judging yourself harshly about your meditation practice, or perhaps congratulating yourself, these are sure signs that aversion or craving are present. Again, this is an opportunity to bring in investigation and curiosity. We're not interested in the storyline, of course, but can we find a feeling or a physical sensation in the body that is connected to that thought? It provides a sign—"Ah, craving or aversion must be present. Can I actually get in touch with the direct experience of them?"

So to bring the meditating heart-mind, or citta, into focus, we're shifting our attention from the meditation object to the heart-mind that is aware, that is meditating. And we might get there by way of a feeling, a mind state, a physical sensation, a mood, a thought—anything might be the way in.

With that preamble, let's do this short meditation exercise. Although we're investigating the realm of the citta, we're actually going to start with a particular focus on the breathing.

Get yourself comfortable and relaxed in your posture, and bring your attention to the breathing. Focus on the aspect of breathing that is most obvious to you. It might be movements in the abdomen or elsewhere in the body. Or it may not be movement—it may be touch. Maybe it's the rhythm of the breathing, the energy of the breathing, the space in which breathing happens. Whatever's most obvious, focus on that sensation, that experience.

We're placing our awareness on the breathing and trying to be as clear about the experience as we can be. For the next three minutes, I want you to see if you can remain with the sensations of breathing, staying continuously aware for just three minutes without a break. If you do find yourself distracted, just immediately bring your awareness back to the breathing and stay with it.

You're halfway through now. It's been one and a half minutes. If you got distracted, take your attention back to your breathing now and refocus your awareness for the next minute and a half.

And now shift the focus of your awareness towards the heart-mind that is meditating. What's your attitude towards your meditation right now? What is the state of your heart-mind? Are you satisfied with

your meditation or dissatisfied? Are you welcoming of your experience, or is there a voice of judgment about how well you did in the exercise? Is there tension in the body or mind?

So how did you go? Any success with tuning into the feeling in the heart-mind at the end there?

One practitioner shared: "There was some amount of noticing that I drifted off a bit, but it was okay. There was both noticing that the breathing's not my favourite, but also noticing that I was doing okay with that. But there was still judging, and judging my not being able to just let that go. It was a mixture of things."

So there was judging and evaluation going on, but it sounds like not very strong. There was also a bit of an underlying sense of acceptance. And I think that's a pretty common experience, whether we recognise it or not—to be continually judging and evaluating our experience and our achievement.

Another practitioner reported: "I managed to maintain mindfulness. There were some things in the background that tried to get my attention, but they stayed in the background. And when I went to the citta and fired into it, there was this little being in the corner, whimpering. Tightness in the citta, like, 'I could be a good girl.' A little being whimpering underneath the pressure to perform."

That's a really powerful, visceral experience of this striving to succeed. And that's exactly what this technique is aiming to bring into the light, because often we're so focused on the meditation object that we're not aware that this experience is also happening—and is indeed driving the way that we relate to the meditation object and the practice. Were you able to stay with that experience at the end there for a while? Yes, she was able to stay with the citta.

Another practitioner offered a different experience: "I was able to stay with the breath, but meanwhile I sort of enjoyed and was amused at almost how the practice had been gamified a bit."

and get to know it.

So it becomes the meditation object. We don't try to get rid of it, and we don't try to ignore it. We greet it like the old friend that it is. And the way we cultivate wise attitude in the meditating heart-mind is by getting to know unwise attitude really, really well—by welcoming it and getting to know it and rejoicing in our clear seeing of it.

So when the demon Mara, the personification of temptation, appears before the Buddha before he's attained awakening to distract him away from his meditation practice, he uses various guises. He takes on different forms and uses tricks to try to scare the Buddha and to seduce him.

Feeling a little bit set up and challenged, and then being able to watch that and wonder about it—is that a form of gripping, or is it just enjoying what's being offered?

And of course it is a set up. It's not about whether or not you can stick with the breath for three minutes. It's a situation that applies a little more pressure to bring to the fore this tendency we have to be tense in

the practice.

Did anyone have the opposite experience of finding at the end that actually there was an okayness with what was going on?

"I felt better. I sort of started off quite tired and my mind felt quite heavy, and when I focused—just not focused—my mind felt lighter for the exercise."

Oh, okay. So it was a feeling that this exercise is helping to focus?

"To focus and to be lighter. Along with that came a lightness. And I stayed with it, but the distraction was my mental commentary about—you know, I knew you were going to say 'what happened,' so that was me pre-empting my sort of commentary of observation."

So the commentator was preparing.

But this lightness that you describe—it's equally important to recognize these states of heart-mind that we're meditating with. Because again, sometimes we can be so focused on the meditation object that we fail to notice the wholesome qualities. Sometimes the wholesome qualities can be quite subtle. So it's important to notice when there's wise attitude in the meditating mind as well, and to really feel the full flavour of that experience. That also helps the mind to become familiar with that experience and to find its way back—to choose that experience in future moments.

So we've had varying levels of success with feeling into the attitude of the heart-mind. We practice this by simply dropping it into the meditation from time to time, by regularly checking in and asking ourselves a question. You can phrase it in a way that works for you, but essentially it's: How am I feeling about the meditation now? What is my mind state now?

The important thing in this practice of checking the attitude in the heart-mind is what we do next. If we notice an unskillful attitude, there are three main movements we could make.

Possibly the initial reflex is to try to get rid of it. Say it's mid-afternoon, that long stretch where there's nothing interesting happening to stir up excitement in the practice. The hall feels a bit silent and stifling, and there's just this restless energy in the mind. It's not even that there's anything interesting to think about—there's just this restless quality, and it won't settle. And then I notice... perhaps I remember to ask myself, what's the attitude in the heart-mind? And I notice that frustration is also present.

So the obvious move I could make is to try to get rid of the frustration. I could berate myself for not accepting this restless state of mind and remind myself sternly that meditation is about letting go and accepting whatever arises.

Would this work? Unlikely, because it's just more resistance to what is arising. This time it's resistance to the frustration. So it would just be more unskillful attitude, driven by aversion.

A second option would be to notice it briefly, maybe note it, and then turn our attention away to another, better meditation object. This choice may also be driven by aversion to the frustration, which makes us unwilling to stay with it—it's not really the meditation object that we prefer. This strategy probably has more chance of success than the previous one. It depends on the level of power in our concentration and mindfulness, and whether they can command more energy if we move to a different meditation object than the original restless state of mind and the frustration that are pulling our energy in a different direction. But one likely outcome of simply noticing frustration and then turning away from it is that it will continue to fester.

So the third option is that we welcome the frustration as an opportunity to develop wisdom. The frustration has already hijacked our meditation. It's an unwanted guest that has not so much turned up on the doorstep as is already inside, on the hearth rug. So what to do but welcome it in, pull up a chair,

into abandoning the path, abandoning the practice. What is the Buddha's response when Mara appears? Does he chase Mara away? Does he outsmart him? Does he go into battle? Does he ignore him? No, he doesn't. I'm sure many of you know how the Buddha responds when he is faced with Mara. He recognizes Mara. He calls Mara out for who he truly is.

And this is what we need to do when we recognize unskillful mind states. We want to see them and we want to understand them, not push them away. This is how we take the power out of them—like the Buddha when he calls Mara's bluff.

And as I mentioned, it's equally important to recognize wholesome mind states and wise attitudes as they arise in the practice. We get to know them, we savor them, we appreciate them, we learn from them. What does it feel like to have a heart that is unmoved by disturbances? What does it feel like to have a heart that is radiating love? So opening to attitude is not only about seeing and working with unskillful attitudes, but it's also knowing a mind that has equanimity, knowing a mind that's imbued with wholesome qualities, knowing a mind that has a wise attitude to the meditation practice.

I want to finish with a final guided meditation—not so much an exercise this time, but just a meditation to once more point us in the direction of this territory. But before I do that, are there any final questions?

A practitioner shares: For me, that welcoming often is very informative and allows me, as you said, to get to know anger or fear or whatever. And sometimes there's the welcoming, but I know underneath there's the thought, "Oh, if I welcome it, it'll go away." And sometimes I'm not sure what to do at that point. There's aversion there in a sense—there's aversion plus the fear or whatever, so there's a lot going on.

Yes, and there can be a lot going on. But essentially it's the same principle. It can regress backwards infinitely, where we can have an initial experience and we're averse to that, and then we're averse to the aversion, and we can be averse to that aversion, and so on. But it's all fundamentally the same principle, which is that we're welcoming or opening up to the aspects of experience that are normally unwelcome,

that we normally want to push away.

So we might be in this dynamic where we're trying to apply meditation tools and work with an experience and welcome it, but we can tell something's off. Something's not quite right—there's something a bit disingenuous here. Maybe we caught a little thought that doesn't actually fit the story of what we're trying to do. In that case, we just get curious: Where is this disingenuous feeling coming from? Can I get in touch with that experience? It's the same basic principle. It's getting in touch with the direct experience, being as intimate with the actual experience as we can be, but always turning towards that aspect of experience that we might habitually turn away from because that's not what we want in the meditation. We want a different object.

And of course it can be very slippery and tricky and subtle, because that is the nature of the mind, and it's also how we habitually move through our lives. That's why this practice can be so eye-opening—because we often don't notice that we bring this attitude even into the meditation practice. It does require constant sensitivity and regular checking. And that might include even when we think we're working with the very craving or aversion that's driving the practice. We still need to check.

Another practitioner asks: A similar experience—every instruction generates another expectation. It's like, turn towards acceptance, and then I'm averse to the aversion, and it's almost like there's nothing you can do about it. And that itself can also be liberating—the realization that there's nothing I can do.

Well, exactly. I think that is the key: we're genuinely not trying to get rid of anything here. We could reframe it—we're going looking for gems that we can polish to cultivate wisdom. So when we find frustration in the heart-mind towards the meditation experience, it's like, "Ah! An unpolished gem." It's not something I'm trying to get rid of. This is like meditation gold. "Oh, here's my afternoon sorted. It's not going to be boring and restless anymore."

I got an opportunity to get to know the nature of frustration. It's actually fascinating, you know. You won't be frustrated at the end of that if you really pull up a chair and grab a cup of tea with it and sit with it. But if you spend your whole afternoon trying to dodge it and not talk to it, then it affects you.

So I think that's a great realisation—it's liberating to understand that the task is simply to see it. I don't have to do anything else. I don't have to try and get rid of it. Not to get rid of it, but to turn all experience into wisdom, because we keep generating experience and then reacting to experience. Now we have to learn a skill to turn all experience into wisdom, to find the liberating potential within suffering itself.

One of the ways to investigate is simply to ask: What's there? What's happening? And I suppose what was happening earlier on was that because there hasn't been a dialogue previously, it's like sitting in silence with a stranger. There's a resistance: "No, I'm not doing this." So the question becomes: How do you build that dialogue when it hasn't existed before?

If the internal dialogue I suggested feels unnatural, then just drop it. Find a way to check in with what's

going on in the heart-mind, but it doesn't have to take the form of asking yourself questions. If the internal dialogue gets in the way, then scrap that entirely. You might find something else that works for you—perhaps some sort of remembering the heart, some felt sense of turning towards it. It's a tool to help you remember to check in, but it doesn't have to be a question and it doesn't have to take a dialogue form if that feels obstructive.

What I'm hearing is that it's not specifically the question that feels difficult—it's that relationship itself, that turning towards what's really going on. It's almost like there's a level of trust that needs to be built. Absolutely. The heart is asking us: "Where have you been for so long? I've been waiting for you to come and talk." So there's a trust to build, and initially there may be no communication at all.

Like any aspect of experience, when we offer these suggestions in the practice, some people grab onto them immediately and say, "Oh my goodness, yes, this is exactly the realm that works for me and I want to dive into this." And other people think, "What are you talking about? I've never turned inward and asked myself what's the feeling tone of this experience before." So absolutely, just feel into it gradually. Try throwing it in there occasionally. If it doesn't feel fruitful, don't worry about it. Drop it. Continue what you're doing. And maybe some other time when you remember, just try it again.

With all of these different tools that we're offering in the practice workshops, it's definitely a case of finding what works for you and then going with that, playing to your strengths. Becoming proficient in meditation or making progress is not dependent on completing all the different modules—until you've mastered the breathing and the elements and you can see the attitude in the heart.

It's not like that at all. These are just all different ways in to becoming intimate with our experience. And you find the ways in that work for you. You just don't worry about the others. Or maybe you listen to the others and occasionally you try them, and your practice changes over time. But you don't spend effort butting your head up against something that's not working.

"I suppose I know where that is—it's a craving to get to know. I have a craving to get to know because it's part of my wider journey. So I think it comes from that as well. I'll drop it and then I'll be keen to pick it up again."

And if you know you have that craving, which of course is very common—this craving to get to know—then you can drop all of these different suggestions in as a question in the practice without any attachment to an answer. So the practice becomes just dropping it in as a question and then being open, seeing what happens.

"Just following on from that, Patrick talked last night about the conceptual world and what he called ultimate reality, which to me is sort of the felt world. So following on from that question, would you say generally—because that question for me was about how do I engage with this heart-mind—is it in the realm of a felt relationship?"

Yes, absolutely. It's about bringing it into the body. When you find the feeling or attitude in the heart-mind, in its purest form it is an affective experience, an experience of the heart. But like I said, the way in there, because for many of us that is not very familiar—we might have lived our lives quite cut off from these deep feelings of the heart—for many of us the way in is through other experiences. But they're all experiences that are happening here and now.

So it may be, like in the examples I gave with the restlessness, that I'm not yet aware there's frustration there, but there's restlessness and this sort of sense of discontent—"Oh God, two and a half hours till dinner." And then I remember to ask myself, "What's my attitude to the meditation right now?" What I might find is not an immediate connection with this raw feeling of frustration, because maybe that's not very familiar to me and I haven't really spent much time hanging out there before. What I might notice is that the chest feels very tight. I wonder what that's about. I've just dropped in this question and then the part of my experience that has presented itself is a tight chest. I don't necessarily even yet associate a tight chest with frustration, but I just notice: tight chest, interesting. And so I hang out with the experience of tight chest. It may be that it reveals the underlying frustration, or not. I just hang out with it, drop the question, continue, and drop it in again at another time.

"It means the ability to transform instantly all the experiences—like a psychic power to transform all the experiences. To transform any unhappy experiences immediately into happy experiences. Psychic ability."

Well, the thing is that the quality of presence and seeing something has a pleasurable quality to it. This is why if I'm restless and then frustration arises and then I can really zero in on the frustration, all of a sudden the meditation becomes energized and pleasurable again—even while the frustration is still here in its raw form, in its raw energetic form. Because it's actually a very energetic and pleasurable experience to be with it and see it.

"You might become energetic when you touch it. Immediately touch it."

Very good.

"Can I ask about that? It seems to me there are different levels of intensity or power in the things that arise in citta. For some of them I can just witness them and they're there, they're perfect as they are, and welcoming them, they evaporate, and a sense of well-being arises. And other things can be beyond my capacity—it's the same phenomenon, it's just something arising in my current experience, but some are easy and some are beyond what I can do and deal with in that moment. Have I got it right? There's an intensity? Why?"

Absolutely. There's a huge range of intensity of experience, and it is really important. We've talked a little bit about not expecting that this intense feeling will necessarily go away. Many times we have to see something over and over and over and over again.

again before it dissolves. So it is important to understand that we are genuinely wanting to see, to hang

out with an experience, to get to know it.

But equally important is knowing when it's time to pull back, because sometimes some experiences are too overwhelming. And the golden rule with practice is that whatever choice we're making in meditation—and there's always lots and lots of choices available to us—whatever choice I'm making, it should be steadying the heart.

Sitting, pulling up a chair, having a cup of tea with my frustration can be incredibly steadying for the heart, because I'm not identifying with the frustration anymore. I'm actually getting to know it. It's quite illuminating. In fact, it's quite mind-blowing to sit with aversion and understand how it shapes your life. That is an experience that's steadying the heart.

But if the feeling is so overwhelming that I'm trying to turn to it and I'm trying to turn to it, but it's not steadying the heart—it's just leading to more agitation, to a greater lack of balance—then it's time to do something else that soothes. I just get up and go for a walk. Or if I like doing a very focused practice to soothe, if that works for me, I might choose to do that, or whatever it is. But the golden rule is that it needs to be steadying the heart.

So it's a very good point. Thank you for raising that.

"I don't understand why there are different intensities, but I accept that there are. Thank you for helping me understand what to do with it."

Yes. Or as Patrick said last night, it's just a natural process. And that is the liberating thing about it. We don't have to do anything. The self doesn't have to get involved and sort things out.

Well, we have chatted through the time that we had available to do the guided meditation, so your mission for this morning, should you choose to accept it, is to check in with the state of the citta, the state of the heart-mind, from time to time when you remember—and to explore ways to welcome whatever is there, be with whatever is there, get to know whatever is there.

Thank you.

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