# Ripening for Insight

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 36:06

In those moments where death might be just a breath away, we do the thing that's most important to do. In that moment, there is nothing more important than securing the oxygen mask in place. And we're urged to take this same attitude towards the practice. In each and every moment, there's nothing more important for us to do than practice—as if smitten by a sword, as if our heads are on fire—because we have a big goal: to end suffering, to abandon identity view.

And at the same time, what would our practice be like if we were practicing the way we want to die? What would we want our last breath to be like? No one wants their last breath to be desperate and panicky. Don't we want it to be calm, accepting, intimate with what's happening? Don't we want our last breath to be effortless, relaxed, not striving? Don't we want our last breath to be a letting go of trying to get anywhere—an experience of effortless peace?

So this is the quality that we need to be cultivating in our practice. And the maturity of wise effort is finding a way to balance this tension: practicing as if we have not a worry in the world and all the time in the world, and simultaneously as if we might die before we even have time to draw the next breath. To navigate this paradox, we need to practice skillfully.

At the start of the retreat, we focus on the basic natural awareness instructions, which is very much the "wandering mindfully" part of the verse. We cultivate an effortless, open, relaxed awareness—just the light touch awareness with which I know I'm seeing, or I know I can feel my hands. This way of practicing is very much about stripping away the complexity of both everyday busy mind and also of meditation technique, coming into a simple awareness, a simple intimacy with whatever is presenting to our radar-like awareness from moment to moment. This is good for developing wise effort and continuity of mindfulness.

But to develop skill in the practice, awareness alone is not enough. Awareness alone is good for wandering mindfully, but not for walking the path. Awareness alone will not help us to abandon identity view. We need to cultivate insight too.

Awareness is as simple as "just this." But awareness is not the whole path. We don't want to solidify the idea that the practice is nothing but being in the present moment, because we can actually practice for years or even decades being in the present moment without necessarily developing deep wisdom about the nature of reality. This might make us a bit less reactive in the present moment, but it won't free the heart from suffering. The practice is so much deeper, so much more profound than that. It's also about creating the conditions for insight in order to free the heart.

Incidentally, "Awareness Alone is Not Enough" is actually the title of one of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's books, which I find slightly ironic because it's his approach to awareness that gets all the attention—because it's so relaxed and radical. People often take this approach to be an "awareness only" or "bare awareness" approach. But if you listen to what Sayadaw U Tejaniya teaches, his main message is about the importance of wisdom in the practice. And by wisdom, he means skill in knowing how to practice to ripen the mind for insight.

So let's turn now to insight, this goal of mindfulness practice. This is the vipassanā in satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā. Satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā is the cultivation of mindfulness for insight. Insight is why we do mindfulness meditation; it's the purpose of the practice. Mindfulness is what we do, but it alone is not the goal.

The simplest, most direct translation of vipassanā is "seeing clearly," based on the interpretation of *vi* as excellent or powerful, and *passanā* as seeing. I personally like Rob Burbea's translation: "seeing that frees," because this captures the purpose of insight. Patrick prefers "seeing separately," because the *vi* in vipassanā can be translated as "separate." And "seeing separately" clarifies what insight actually is: seeing that things we took to be enduring, solid entities—things—are actually nothing but a flow of different experiences. We take them to be a single thing because we're so used to relating to the world through a layer of concept. Patrick defines insight as seeing our experienced world as a flow of events.

Let's use the example of chronic pain, which is something familiar to me and may be familiar to many of you. In the early days of my practice—and still today if I'm not being mindful—I relate to my pain as something solid, a real thing that endures over time and that I have a relationship with. It's my pain, and it's part of my identity. It's plagued me all my adult life. It makes certain kinds of activities impossible or painful, and it has cost me thousands of dollars in visits to osteos and physios over the years. I have a belief that it's a part of me; it's mine. I relate to the pain inside a story that stretches from my past to my future—a story about the impact that this pain has had on my life.

is likely to have in the future. And when there's a flare-up of the pain, or when it's bothering me on a retreat, this is how I relate to it—as a solid entity and a part of my identity. And the story starts running.

Perhaps on the first day that the pain appears, it might be something like, "Uh-oh, here's this pain again. This could be problematic. I hope this isn't going to stick around and cause me too much trouble." Then by the second morning, I'm even more invested in identifying with it. "Oh, it's been here for 24 hours now. It's going to make it impossible to sit. I might have to leave the retreat early," and so on. By now, I've well and truly shot myself with the second arrow of suffering.

But if I sit with the pain for a while, I begin to notice that it's not as solid as I assumed. For one thing, it hasn't actually been here for 24 hours. It comes and goes. One moment it's here, and another moment it's not. It doesn't hurt when I'm lying down. It doesn't hurt when my attention is distracted by something else. Perhaps when I'm in the dining hall enjoying all of the delicious tastes and sensations that are

provided as part of the lunch experience, the pain sensations drop away. But I have this belief that because the pain appeared yesterday morning and it's still here this morning, it's been here for 24 hours. This is the sense of permanence that we habitually project onto things.

If I go to see a physio and they ask me how long I've had the pain, I will confidently reply, "Well, it first showed up yesterday morning, so it's been here for 24 hours." But in what sense is that true? When I was eating lunch and delighting in that experience and I didn't notice the pain, what do I think—that the pain was somewhere floating nearby, waiting to possess me again when lunch was finished? Of course not. Pain is nothing but a phenomenological experience. It has no independent existence. So the idea that my pain has been here for 24 hours turns out to be a concept that doesn't survive mindfulness.

By bringing mindfulness to it, I start to see it more clearly and I see the different experiences separately. I'm seeing it as a flow of events. There was a sensation of pain, and then the attention shifted and there was no sensation of pain. After a while, there was a sensation of pain again, and then the body position shifted and the sensation of pain disappeared. Then a while later, the sensation of pain returned, and so on.

This is the seeing aspect of vipassanā. But insight is more than just seeing clearly. To go back to Rob Burbea's interpretation, it's seeing that frees. And this kind of seeing also requires understanding, ñāṇa—understanding the way things really are. Insight contains both of these aspects. The Buddha uses the term "seeing and understanding," ñāṇa-dassana, to indicate that they're a package, that we need them both.

Seeing is what we do in the here and now. It's always and necessarily here and now, in the present. The pain comes, the pain goes, and I notice it coming and going. Eventually, when the mind is ripe, understanding arises from the seeing.

What we see and understand are, of course, the three universal characteristics, samanya lakkhana: impermanence, anicca; unsatisfactoriness, dukkha; and not-self, anattā. They're universal because everything we experience shares these characteristics.

Firstly, impermanence. Every experience is impermanent in that experience is always changing and nothing, no experience, sticks around. We might start to marvel at how the experience of the pain doesn't actually stay stable for more than a moment, even though I had thought it to be solid and enduring. The sensations that I thought were constant are actually constantly shifting and changing. It shifts and changes. It comes and goes. And I start to understand its nature is impermanent.

Secondly, dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, suffering. Every experience is a cause of unsatisfactoriness or suffering because of our tendency to cling onto it, to identify with it. We might start to notice that with the pain, the real suffering comes when I identify with it, when I start spinning the stories of the past me that was in pain and the future me that will be in pain, when I shoot myself with the second arrow. Or we

might see the mental aversion to the pain and recognize that it's actually the aversion that creates the suffering. The pain is just a constellation of physical sensations.

But when aversion arises in the heart-mind, then it suddenly turns into an unbearable experience.

I've had a lot of experience working with aversion. It seems to be plenty of it in my field of experience to use as a meditation object. I remember one time on an early retreat—probably one of the first I did with Patrick—I used to have so much trouble with the sitting, so much physical pain, so much desperation to change positions and shift my body. I used to sit there miserably, waiting for the meditation bell to ring so that I could escape from the hall and make my body more comfortable.

And at some point, the teacher, who was Patrick, directed me to work with the aversion to the pain. That was like a whole universe opening up inside me, because I found it was actually quite clear and obvious to see this aversion. It was like sparks shooting up from the solar plexus—these little sparks smoldering there. And so I started to enjoy sitting without moving, because I was waiting and watching to see what the aversion would do.

What would happen was that the uncomfortable sensations would stay fairly constant, with the aversion sort of smoldering here in the heart. Then at some point the aversion would flare up the central channel, and in that moment, the experience became unbearable—and before I'd even made a conscious decision, I'd shifted position.

So: impermanence, dukkha, and finally anattā, not-self. Everything that exists has the nature of not-self. There's nothing at all in our experience that, when we examine it closely, we can hold onto and say, "This is me." We understand that what I took to be this very solid and menacing entity—my pain—is nothing but a flow of experiences. It isn't my pain after all. The "me" that exists in that story about my chronic pain is just a character in a story. And when I drop the storyline, this is all there is to it. There's no past pain. There's no future pain. And there's no me who is in pain.

So insight means something quite specific. It's a technical term in the practice—insight into these three characteristics. This is different from psychological insight into our behavior or relationships or mental states. Meditation can sometimes provide psychological insight, but this is not the aim of insight meditation. We might go on retreat and come away with a better understanding of something going on in our lives. This kind of revelation can come to us on retreat; it's a wonderful side effect of the practice, but it's not the insight we mean when we're talking about insight meditation.

This is how we begin to cut through our delusion: through clear seeing and understanding. The relationship between these two—between seeing and understanding—is a bit mysterious. Often we have to see the same pattern playing out many, many times before we understand. Understanding is not something we can force, and we won't understand until our minds are ripe for wisdom. Insight is not something we can do. All we can do is set up the conditions that make it possible, or even likely.

Patrick's Zen teacher from his early days, Robert Aitken Roshi, used to say that meditation does not produce insight. Insight always comes about as an accident, but meditation makes us accident-prone.

So we can't do insight, but we can nurture a curiosity about the way things really are, and a desire to see and understand clearly. This is the quality of wise investigation—dhamma vicaya. Wise investigation is turning our curiosity and interest toward our experience. It involves developing aim and precision, which we've been talking about in the morning workshops. But most importantly, it's an intention to understand our experience clearly.

When I was practicing at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's meditation center in Burma, he had no time for us asking him to explain why we were having this or that meditation experience. He would always say, "Don't ask me why that's happening. Go and find out for yourself." It turned out that he learned this from his own teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, whose style of teaching was apparently never to explain things, but instead always to turn the question back: "Well, why did that happen? Go and practice and find out, and come back and report." Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that he learned to just ask himself "Why?" whenever something unexpected or interesting turned up in the practice.

This is a good way to sum up why investigation matters. We track our experience in order to see the patterns and understand the causal relationships. And we track experiences by being intimate with them in the present moment.

Say I'm trying to have a blissful and concentrated sit, but instead I'm plagued by a dullness that I just can't shake. I could resist this mind state with varying strategies and varying levels of success. Or I can ask myself, why? I can get curious about the dullness. What's the experience of dullness? Is it a mental dullness or a physical, energetic dullness? What does dullness actually feel like? Does it have a physical location? Is it associated with a certain type of thinking or feeling? What's my attitude toward the dullness? What happens to the dullness if I track it over time?

What's important here is that we're not looking for the answer by thinking about it or theorizing about it. We're looking for the answer in our direct experience. This is a really important distinction. Investigation doesn't mean jumping on a thought train about maybe I'm feeling dull because I didn't get enough sleep last night, or I didn't have enough protein with breakfast, and perhaps I'll eat two eggs for breakfast tomorrow morning and then I'll see if I'm dull at the same time tomorrow afternoon.

In fact, this kind of conceptual speculation is what the Buddha calls unwise attention, which he describes as any thinking along this theme: Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?

Conceptual speculation about past me and future me—these have no place in wise attention and wise

investigation. Am I feeling dull because I didn't have an egg at breakfast? This may be relevant from a health point of view, but from a practice point of view, this is just conceptual blah, blah, blah about how I was in the past at breakfast. The Buddha calls this a thicket of views that will just reinforce the belief in a separate self.

Instead, he advises that we should direct wise attention, yoniso manasikāra, to the nature of suffering, which we understand when we pay very close attention to our experience. We're always interested in our direct experience, but with an attitude of investigation—of wanting to clarify, to understand.

This is how we resolve the initial paradox, how we wander mindfully to abandon identity view. We develop increasing intimacy with present experience by surrendering fully to it—just this. But at the same time, we cultivate the qualities of wise attention and wise investigation by being as clear and precise as we can, so that we begin to understand that experience is ever-changing, that this conditions that, that we suffer when we cling, and that ultimately there's nothing to cling on to.

In accordance with the principle of no preference for one meditation object over another, being willing to work with whatever arises, wise investigation requires a genuine welcoming of the experience—which we talked a bit about this morning—a willingness to sit down with it and have a cup of tea together and get to know each other.

I thought I'd share, to finish up, my most transformative experience of this from the time I was practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma. But the origins of this start when I first took up meditation practice, because the bane of my early meditation was relentless, obsessive thinking. I don't know if anyone else here can resonate with that. I can actually still remember the content of some of the thought loops that played during some of my early meditation retreats—right here in this hall, as a matter of fact.

I was someone who struggled to focus on the breathing, struggled to keep the attention in the body. It felt like this was because of the enormous power of my thinking, which was relentless. And so I went into battle with the thinking. First I threw everything I could at it. I tried to smother it and suppress it with concentration, which failed miserably and left me with these energy explosions that would derail me for half a day.

That went on for a few years, and then I got smarter about it. I honed the quality of wise investigation and learned how to make thinking the meditation object. I learned a lot about my thinking. I started to see how it was driven by aversion or boredom or craving or fear. I started to perceive the relationship it had with my body and its energetic movement. This was another few years of practice.

And by this point, I was congratulating myself on how well I could work with thinking as a meditation object. The only problem was that it still hadn't gone away. Well, actually, most of it had, because what I'd been able to develop was the sharpness of mindfulness and investigation honed into a kind of laser beam which, if I was really vigilant and dedicated in the practice, I could direct at most thoughts and cut them

down before they'd even had time to take shape.

So that was satisfying, but it was quite high-energy work. And if I was being honest with myself, it still exhausted me in my practice by constantly demanding my attention and vigilance. The most infuriating part was that there was one type of thought—a little voice in the back of my head. I'm sure none of you have this. I call it the commentator. And the commentator could not be slain by the mindfulness laser because it was behind the laser. No matter what direction you aimed it in, there was the commentator helpfully and encouragingly narrating the experience: "You're doing a great job. You're not letting any of the thoughts pass. You're definitely progressing in the practice. Just stay vigilant..." and on and on. This endless narration of the meditation experience.

By then I had convinced myself that this commentator was all that stood between me and a liberating and blissful experience of not-self. The situation built to a crescendo while I was on this long retreat. One night I just hit the wall. I had been investigating thinking for days, getting more and more refined with my precision, developing the sharpness and clarity of my mindfulness, but I could not turn off thinking.

In desperation, I actually went to Sayadaw's residence at night and knocked on the door and asked for an individual interview, which thankfully he granted me. All of this came pouring out—how I had developed all this skill to work with thinking as a meditation object and it was still plaguing me. I don't know if I actually said the words, but I think he could read it in my face and body language that I was really at the point of thinking, should I just head out the gates?

He listened and looked at me and then he just said, "Thoughts are not the enemy, but you are still trying to get rid of them."

And that was the thing that turned everything around. I was still identifying with the thinking and thus I was still resisting it. The resistance to it was preventing me from seeing the identification. I saw that I'd been investigating thinking to get rid of thinking. I'd actually been pumping energy into the thinking with my ardent investigation, which was driven by aversion. Thoughts aren't the enemy. They aren't the self. They're just thoughts. And I was creating my own suffering by treating them as the enemy.

Once I finally stopped trying to push them away, I could see them clearly and I could understand their not-self nature. And since then, thinking has never again been a problem for me in my practice—which is not the same thing as saying that my practice is thought-free. In fact, I was thinking about this for the purposes of this talk, and I'm not sure if I should publicly admit this in a talk that's being streamed out into the ether, but I would estimate that in the twenty-five years I've been practicing, the amount of thinking has probably only reduced by about thirty percent. The difference is it's not a problem anymore.

So the qualities that are needed in wise investigation are a willingness to welcome anything that shows up and an attitude of playful curiosity. Over time, these will ripen the mind for insight and hopefully make us accident-prone.

Is that the second awakening factor?

Yes, Dhammavichaya—the factor of investigation.

The question arose because I had suggested not investigating the thought itself, so what should we investigate instead?

The principle in meditation is that we're never interested in the storyline. We're never interested in the content of the thinking. Instead, we're interested in whatever is unfolding in direct experience—whatever we can notice that is clear. And then we stay with that to see what it reveals.

It is possible to work with thinking as a meditation object—and I think we'll be exploring this in one of the upcoming morning workshops—but we're never working with the content of the thought, the storyline. What we're working with is thinking as an activity that is happening here and now in the body, heart, and mind, because it involves all three.

We can hook onto any aspect of that which is clear. We might notice a particular type of thought, a recurring thought, a very familiar thought, or a very sticky thought. The way we might start to work with it is to ask ourselves, "Oh, I recognise this one—this is planning mind," or whatever it is. "What else is going on in my experience that might be related to this? Is there tension in the body, for example?"

When there's thinking, there will undoubtedly be tension somewhere in the body. There might be other physical sensations. There might be a feeling quality in the heart—not the literal heart, but a felt quality to the experience.

So we look for what is clear and obvious about the present experience.

Starting in the body is a very good idea, because it is clear and obvious and in the present. And it's best to stay there—without the analysis paralysis, because that analysis is always about the past.

That's right.

Good night, and have a good rest.

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