Transitions

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 31:11

So here we are at the start of our last full day, and we've been practicing for over a week together now with an emphasis on natural awareness. I hope that you've had a taste now of the solid foundation of samādhi and mindfulness that an open and relaxed approach to practice can cultivate.

Of course, we've been supported in this by the retreat conditions. We're removed from our usual distractions, our needs are taken care of, and generally it's a very conducive environment for practicing meditation.

But as I mentioned in my opening talk, natural awareness promises more than just a relaxed approach on retreat. The power in this approach is that we can use it to cultivate momentum in our mindfulness in everyday life as well. And this makes insight possible too in everyday life, because wherever awareness is available, then so too insight and wisdom are available.

It does take some experience of this approach to really gain confidence in its depth and in this possibility. But the potential is to take our everyday experience—the messiness and the chaos of our everyday lives—as the grounds for insight, so that we can identify impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self in the very activities and interactions and daily habits where our delusions and our construction of the self is most entrenched.

So we're coming towards the end of the retreat, and often this is met by two movements amongst the yogis.

One is the attitude of, "Oh well, I've nearly made it. We're nearly there." Thoughts about the future start to arise a little more frequently and persistently than they were a few days ago. We've been working pretty hard, and so we kind of lean into those thoughts. Before we know it, we've jumped on a thought train about a future me that will start tomorrow when I leave the retreat. I'm planning and I'm invested in this future projection of my life that's going to start tomorrow.

Another response to the end of the retreat is, "Oh, the retreat's ending and I'm not sure I've got exactly everything I came to get out of it just yet." This is the kind of defending the walls of the retreat, as if our life depends on it—work really hard and don't give in to distractions.

What I want to invite you to do is to walk a middle path between these two. Lean a little more into meditation as a way of being in this next twenty-four hours by pushing the boundaries of the retreat conditions a little bit and bringing in a little bit more everyday life.

I'm inviting you to experiment with gradually deconstructing the walls of the retreat, or at least pushing them back a little bit, and see how your awareness and insight withstands it.

I'm going to suggest a few minor modifications that you might like to make to your practice over the next twenty-four hours. Like everything that we offer in the morning workshops, it's entirely up to you which ones you take up, which ones you play with, and which ones you run with. But the idea is to give yourself the opportunity to work with conditions that are a little more like everyday life as we move into this transition phase. Because, as I've said a number of times, if we don't practice being aware in everyday activities, then how are we supposed to get good at it?

The first one I want to mention is a basic technique that Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses for meditation in everyday life, which he calls fifty-fifty awareness. This is simply the idea that while I'm doing any activity—any everyday activity—I use fifty percent of my mental energy for engaging in the activity, doing what needs to be done, thinking about what needs to be thought about. The other fifty percent of my mental energy I reserve for meditation, for being aware of what I'm doing.

So if I'm having a shower or cooking or having a conversation or whatever it is that I'm doing, I'm using half of my mental energy to engage in the task and half of my mental energy is reserved for watching myself engage in the task.

I can demonstrate this pretty easily. Are you meditating right now? Well, apart from Patrick, who clearly hasn't been cultivating the momentum. Are the rest of you meditating right now? I bet most of you are. I actually think you probably can't help it. Am I right? Because there's some momentum in the practice and the mindfulness flows.

So you're meditating and you're also listening to me and considering what I'm saying and how you're going to put the instructions into practice. That's fifty-fifty awareness. You're already doing it. It's actually nothing new at this point in a retreat. It's what we're cultivating, and it's the natural effect of the momentum that has built up in the mindfulness.

We're already naturally doing fifty-fifty awareness. It's not introducing anything particularly new at this point in the retreat, but it is helpful to notice it, because then we can notice what it feels like, we can notice the experience of it, we can notice that it's possible to have some of our energy doing what we need to do—listening to a dharma talk, doing our yogi job, whatever it is—and at the same time some of our energy is reserved for maintaining the continuity of awareness. If we can notice that and get familiar with it, then it helps us when we go back into daily life to know what to look for, where to aim, and even have the confidence that, "Oh yeah, this is possible. I know what this feels like."

The second suggestion, if you haven't tried this already—because it has come up a few times in the retreat, and this is absolutely just if it feels like something that interests you, not at all obligatory—is to play with awareness of seeing.

This can be a powerful practice for meditation in everyday life because seeing is such a huge part of virtually every activity that we do. It's actually our predominant physical sense for interacting with the world and thus constructing our world. I think this is probably why so many meditation techniques emphasize closing your eyes, because it's a very effective way of immediately cutting off our experienced world.

But of course, the only problem is if we only ever practice meditation with eyes closed, then we never get good at meditation with eyes open.

So when I say awareness of seeing, I'm actually not so much concerned with whether your eyes are open or closed on the meditation cushion. This is more about noticing the experience of seeing when you're moving, and also on the cushion if that appeals to you. But I think there's a lot more depth to the experience of awareness of seeing when we're moving around, when the visual field is moving, or when we have to use the visual field because we're engaging in activities.

And one more suggestion I have for you is to play with faster movement. This might sound quite radical as a suggestion. I think it feels wrong, am I right? It feels wrong to make fast movements on a retreat. And there are good reasons for this. Slow movement is conducive for settling the mind, allowing the mindfulness to catch up with the body, as it were, and to get the mindfulness going, to establish some momentum. Slow movement is also important for silence of body, which is important when we're practicing in community.

So it's a conducive condition for mindfulness, but it's not a necessary condition for mindfulness. And I think it's important that we see that clearly in the practice.

We come on retreat, and I don't know about you, but it can feel like even if I really need to break out a little bit and go for a walk on a trail away from the center, even then walking fast feels like I'm doing something wrong. You might think, "What if another yogi comes around the corner in the opposite direction and I'm walking too fast?" We have this idea that mindfulness and slow movement are so interdependent that mindfulness is somehow dependent on slow movement. We worry that if we speed up, our mindfulness will crumble—like we might jeopardize the whole retreat if we go around moving too fast.

But of course that's a ridiculous idea. If the mindfulness that we're cultivating here over nine days is so precious and brittle that it can't even withstand us walking fast, then at some point we need to overcome the association between mindfulness and slow movement. Or we have no hope of being mindful when we go home. And particularly not when we start rushing at home. I mean, I have two kids waiting for me at home. So if I can't be mindful during fast movement, then I can tell you I have no hope of being mindful during everyday life.

So my challenge to you is to find a way to start to weave a bit more fast movement into your practice in

this context over the next twenty-four hours. Out of consideration for the other yogis and the retreat container, it's important that this is alone and in private. So that means either in your room, or take a walk—write down in the book up there that you're going out for a walk and take a walk off the center, down the road or on a trail.

If it works for you, taking a walk can be excellent because then you can really let yourself play with faster movement and watch the mindfulness and see how it survives a faster tempo. You can push this as far as you want. You can go for a jog for all I care. But be tuned in to the quality of the mindfulness. And you might discover something quite surprising. You might discover that the body can be quite dysregulated through exertion—heart racing, breathing elevated, sweating—you might not get to work up a sweat today—but the body can be quite dysregulated and yet the mind can be cool, calm, unmoving at the same time.

So you could try walking fast off the center, away from the center. Or if that's not easy for you or not appealing, you could think of another way to do some fast moving in the privacy of your room. You could set yourself the task of doing some of your daily chores in your room quickly. You could even set yourself a little challenge like, "Okay, I'm going to get up, get dressed, fold my clothes, put them away as fast as I can and watch the awareness while I'm doing it." And in that case, because you're setting up a little challenge for yourself, what you might find is the quality of rushing comes. This is great practice, because isn't that something we deal with on a daily basis back home?

Afterwards, you can slow down again, settle the heart, settle the mind, and reflect a little bit on what that experience was like. How did the mindfulness survive faster movement?

So I guess the point I want to emphasize is that this approach is far more radical than simply choosing, "Am I going to sit now or am I going to walk now when I'm on retreat?" It's about dissolving the dichotomy between on the cushion and the rest of our lives, because awareness is always available. It's available when we're sitting in the hall, and when we're wandering in the bush, and when we're going for a jog, and when we're writing an email, and when we're arguing with our partner. Not to say that it's equally easy in those situations, but the mind will get much better at choosing awareness in a particular situation if it has had practice. So we have to practice in all situations—easy and difficult, mundane and chaotic.

I'll stop there and check if there are any questions about these suggestions, anything that's not clear about how to put them into practice.

"In terms of the awareness of seeing, if you decide to make seeing the meditation object and you notice that you're attracted to objects, is that not quite what you're getting at?"

Well, what do you think? If you decide to make seeing the meditation object and you notice that you're attracted to objects, what would be your response in the practice?

"I guess I'm thinking that if you're attracted to objects... yeah, I guess it just becomes another object."

Exactly. Then it becomes part of the package.

In fact, then it becomes the very thing that draws you into the practice through curiosity. "Oh, isn't that fascinating? I look at what attracts me and I never really noticed that before." And in that drawing in, the samadhi can arrive because we've come together and collected around it.

Yes, absolutely. So there are two movements you can make when you notice that an object draws you in. You can either get interested in the quality of the attraction itself, which is investigating the movement of the heart, or you can be drawn into that object and allow it to become an object of serenity or samadhi—that's using the natural pleasure in the heart that some objects can provide.

Now, I have one final suggestion for you. This one might blow your socks off a bit, so get ready. This is the main morning practice exercise that I'm going to offer you for today.

Today, those who want to will have the opportunity to practice speaking and listening meditation. Speaking and listening. This is going to take place in a very structured way as an intentional meditation practice, and it's completely optional. The reason we're doing this is because interpersonal communication is such a big part of our lives, and it's one that we tend to find very difficult to bring awareness to.

If we just conduct a little straw poll in this room: who is satisfied with the amount of awareness they bring to their communication with loved ones, friends, and colleagues in their everyday lives? Any hands? Excellent—we have a couple of people. Who would like to be better at it? Okay, the overwhelming majority.

Well, as I keep saying, the way we get better is that we practice. This was very much a central part of the practice at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's meditation center in Yangon. There was a loose noble silence, but it was understood that at any time you could talk. It was also absolutely expected that when you went to report in your interview, you reported on the talking you had done and on the continuity of your awareness while you were talking.

There was this sort of unofficial time—like a Dharma discussion hour—when the heat had settled and the dusk was falling and it was just tolerable to be outside and to move. At that time of day, people would congregate in groups of two or three and do these gentle laps. There was a driveway that went right up the center of the meditation center, and people would just do these gentle laps up and down in the dusky twilight, talking together—preferably quietly—about the Dharma. It was an integral part of the practice: getting familiar with continuous mindfulness while you're speaking and listening.

So the way it's going to work is this: there's a designated meeting spot, which is the covered veranda area at the front of the center. If you go up the middle of the garden to the veranda area and the building, there's a covered veranda that's like a thoroughfare out to the road—just a little area with a couple of chairs. That's the meeting place.

If you decide to participate, you go up to that area and wait until someone else turns up, then pair up with that person. This isn't a chance to catch up with a friend—you just see who's there and pair up together. Once you've met someone and formed a pair, you need to move away from that immediate meeting area. We don't want the meeting area to get clogged with little conversations that then draw in additional people who turn up.

This is a bit challenging because of the weather today, so we've done our best to arrange for it. When you've formed a pair, you have two choices. You can make use of two sets of chairs that have been placed nearby. As you're looking toward the road from the covered veranda, if you look to the left, the veranda comes around in an L shape into the staff area. Right up at that end, just outside the staff area, we've put two chairs that are covered and private on the edge of the veranda—that's one place a pair can go.

The other place is that if you continue through the covered veranda as if you're going out of the center, just on the right is the retreat manager's purple cabin, and Margie has very generously set up two chairs under her little front porch—another little covered area where two people can sit. So there's opportunity for two pairs to sit down together.

The other option, which you may prefer anyway, is to grab a raincoat from the row of hooks as you're looking out toward the road—those raincoats are always available to yogis. Or take an umbrella; there are umbrellas all around the center for yogi use.

Another option is for the two of you to go for a little wander down the road together and then come back up. You should be in a pair, not in a group. Have a short conversation together—ideally only five minutes, perhaps ten minutes maximum. Then end the conversation together and leave the speaking and listening area, returning to the main part of the retreat centre in silence.

What you talk about doesn't really matter. You're not practising being a great conversationalist, and I think we can all have some understanding and compassion for each other that we may well be a bit rusty in this regard. We're practising maintaining mindfulness during speaking and listening. So it doesn't matter if the conversation is a bit stilted or if you can't find the words you want. Take it slowly. I would suggest sticking to the here and now—how the retreat's been going, what you've enjoyed about being here, for example. I'd suggest steering clear of world politics.

It's okay if it feels clunky. It's okay if it feels forced. It's okay to take it slowly, and to ask the other person if you can pause while you ground your awareness. In fact, this can be a good thing to establish beforehand if you're both interested—to say, "Look, I might take a couple of breaths before I reply to you."

What should you be aware of throughout the experience? The first thing to note is that this meditation exercise has already started. It doesn't actually matter whether or not you choose to participate—you're still going to be engaging with this idea and this possibility for the rest of the morning. So you can notice your reaction to this possibility starting from now, and especially once you leave the hall. Even if you

decide not to do it, watching your reaction to the idea is already an important part of the practice. Has excitement arisen in the mind? Has anxiety arisen? It's a great opportunity to watch and feel your reactions. I'm adding a bit of fuel to the fire of your meditation practice for this last day.

Then there's your awareness when you go to the meeting place. What's the feeling in the heart? Is it excitement? Eagerness? Fear? It may feel uncomfortable and exposing to go there. You don't know who you're going to meet. You don't even know if there will be someone there to meet with. So be aware of any feeling of self-consciousness, embarrassment, or eagerness.

Once you've paired up and you are speaking to the other person, use whatever you can to ground your awareness and stay connected to your embodied experience while you're talking. It could be physical sensations in the body, the sound of your own voice, awareness of where the energy is in the body. Is the energy rushing up into the head? You might also notice the quality of rushing or the quality of eagerness. It can really help to ground the awareness in the physical sensations in the lower half of the body.

When you're listening, you can use similar anchors to ground the awareness. But pay special attention to whether you're staying in your own experience as you listen to someone else, or whether you're really going outside yourself and identifying with the other person, or getting caught up in eagerness about what you want to say next—not really being here and now with the listening.

After you've finished your conversation, you leave the speaking and listening area, and the practice continues. Be with the heart-mind as it gradually settles. Notice what has been stirred up and watch the process of the heart-mind coming back into balance. This is a really important part of the process. So don't stay in the meeting area and jump straight into another conversation. This is blind dating, not speed dating.

You can go back for another conversation if you want, but wait until the heart and mind have settled before you try again. The meeting place will be open until the end of the lunch break—until 2:30. So from the time we finish here until 2:30, that gives you quite a bit of time. You don't need to rush, and you can go back for another conversation if you feel it's been really beneficial or you're intrigued to work with it more.

But if you do feel the urge to go back for more, check in with the heart-mind about the motivation. Are you wanting to go back because it's a really interesting meditation practice and you want the opportunity to learn more from it? Or is it just a distraction or entertainment—a way to avoid the remaining hours of the retreat?

Okay, any questions?

I think I feel very challenged to practice right speech in daily interactions with people. Very challenged.

Yes, that's right. It's very common to feel very challenged to practice right speech. Interpersonal

communication is, of course, one of the most difficult areas to maintain our mindfulness. Because most of the stuff that triggers us comes from other people, especially those who are close to us.

Are the instructions clear and complete? Good.

We'll wrap up so you can go and get chatting, shall we?

I will say, don't forget in the excitement of this final suggestion—don't forget the earlier suggestions that I made. Don't forget about playing with fifty-fifty awareness, awareness of seeing, faster movement. These are also valuable ways to practice breaking down that dichotomy between retreat and everyday life.

And we will have, after 2:30, time to really settle back into the practice and play around with those other options, if you like, in that last big chunk of practice opportunity that we have this afternoon.

Enjoy.

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