Invitation to Dhamma

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 48:59

So tonight we're going to talk about the invitation to Dharma, and we're going to start with the middle way.

When the Buddha was awakened as a young man and decides he's going to teach, he goes looking for his five former companions who were with him in his days as an ascetic, because he thinks they might conceivably understand what he's talking about. Two months after his awakening, he teaches the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Rolling the Dharma Wheel. And in it, the first thing he taught was the middle way.

You've probably heard of Buddhism as the middle way—it's quite commonly associated. The middle way in this particular discourse is the middle way of practice that lies between two extremes or two ends. In Pali, this is *anta*. And they are the two extremes of the pursuit of happiness through sensual indulgence versus the pursuit of happiness through asceticism.

Now, where can we find the middle way? To begin with, the middle way cannot be defined as the opposite of another way, because that would be an *anta*, an extreme, an end, not a middle. The opposite of indulgence is asceticism, which means asceticism is just another extreme. The opposite of asceticism is indulgence, which means indulgence is just another extreme. Often people say the middle way is the medium way—the midpoint between these two extremes. But that's just another *anta*, because the midpoint is the opposite of the ends, so it's still an extreme.

The middle way can be found only where there is no *anta*, where there is no extreme, there is no end, there is no place where we are stuck on anything. So the middle way emerges as a dynamic balance between opposites. It's a place characterised by no fixed positions. And if you get a sense that this has got something to do with not-self and emptiness, you're absolutely right. This balance can only be found in the present. It cannot be found if we're holding on to the past or striving for the future. It's only found in the absence of clinging, in the absence of escaping from.

In this discourse, the Buddha defines the middle way as the eightfold path. Everybody who knows something about Buddhism knows about the eightfold path. If you look at this path, it is characterized by dynamic complexity. There are eight factors, and all of them are necessary. If any one of them is too weak or too strong in comparison to the others, the path doesn't work. The whole system collapses.

In other words, balance is everything in this practice, and balance requires pleasure because it requires delicacy. When we are driven by either what we want or what we're trying to escape from, we blunder

because we're desperate to get away or desperate to get something. When we blunder about, we lose our sensitivity to what is actually going on now.

The middle way is one expression of the Buddha's fundamental teaching of dependent arising. In Pali, this is *paṭicca samuppāda*. If you have any interest in Buddhist philosophy, you would have heard about dependent arising. It's considered very difficult to understand and very esoteric, so I'll explain it now.

What dependent arising is about is an expression of the underlying patterns of experience. It's the systems view of reality. What it's saying is that each individual experience we undergo is one aspect of an almost infinitely complex system made up of a vast number of other aspects of experience, all of them intimately related to each other. These relationships are normative—in practical terms, they are reliable and they can be mapped and understood. To sum it up, the world of dependent arising is a world of relationships, not of things.

Given that dependent arising is how nature works, this is the basic framework. What should we do about this? How are we supposed to respond? We do the practice, which consists of cooperating with these natural conditions so that we move toward the cessation of suffering. When we understand the natural laws that govern the arising and cessation of experienced events—of *dhammas*—we can learn to live in such a way that we abandon those events that lead to suffering and cultivate those events that lead to the cessation of suffering. We can cultivate a path. This is the foundation for the path.

It's really important to recognise that all of this is about nature and how nature works. The Buddha addresses this issue in a discourse called "Urgent." It's a brief discourse, and the Buddha says a farmer has three urgent duties.

What three? A farmer swiftly makes sure the field is well ploughed and tilled. Next, they swiftly plant seeds in season. When the time is right, they swiftly irrigate or drain the field. The farmer has no special power or ability to say, "Let the crops germinate today, let them flower tomorrow, let them ripen the day after." But as the seasons change, there comes a time when that farmer's crops germinate, flower, and ripen.

You see how he's talking about natural process—the seasons that roll on, certain things done at a certain time, and this gives a certain result.

In the same way, a practitioner has three urgent duties. What three? Undertaking training in the higher ethics, the higher heart, and the higher wisdom—sīla, samādhi, paññā. These are the three trainings. That practitioner has no special power or ability to say, "Today, let my heart be freed from the influences by not holding," or tomorrow, or the day after. But as that practitioner trains, there comes a time when their heart is freed from the influences by not holding.

Now what is the Buddha saying here? Why is he comparing the practice to farming, to gardening? What he's saying is that we do not control the process of practice and awakening. Yet, as we practice, the heart

opens and the result naturally emerges. And this understanding is built into the Buddha's image of path. Of course, when you talk about Buddhism, the Buddha's practice, there's a lot of talking about path. If we're cultivating a path, what are we doing? We're setting a direction and moving along it. And if we're going to do that, we need to be able to influence the flow of events.

But one practical consequence of the infinite complexity of dependent arising is that I discover it is impossible to control my experience. The classic example: let's say I'm struggling in my practice, and then suddenly everything slips into place and the meditation runs smoothly. Has that happened this week? Once or twice? When this happens, I think, "That's it. I've finally cracked this practice." And I confidently sit down for my next session, and everything is in total chaos. I can spend the rest of the week struggling to reproduce that experience and completely failing.

So why can't I reproduce a past experience? Because that experience—any experience—is the result of an enormously large number of conditions coming together in a certain way, and most of these conditions are completely unknown to me. It doesn't sound like science. It isn't. It's nature. These conditions suddenly come together in a specific pattern, and my body-mind shifts into a smooth, clear meditation session. And then, just as suddenly, conditions shift again and this smoothness disappears—and it ain't coming back, not for a while. I cannot make it happen.

So what can I do? Remember, dependent arising says that these patterns that govern the flow of experience are normative. In other words, these patterns can be mapped and they can be understood.

Just to give a kind of local example of what this means: first of all, this kind of understanding is not unique to the Buddha. It's part of traditional systems of knowledge. For example, many years ago when I was studying in Brisbane, I had a friend who used to hang out on Stradbroke Island off the coast. He used to spend time with the Indigenous owners—the men, of course. One day he was out with a dugong man—a man of knowledge, a man of wisdom, a young bloke in this case. They were chopping wood in the forest when the dugong man mentioned conversationally that the mullet were running, so it was a good time to go fishing. My friend had the presence of mind to ask, "How do you know the mullet are running?" The dugong man pointed to the ground where there was a line of hairy caterpillars who were active. He said, "When you see this, the mullet are running." Isn't it obvious?

Now, the Dugon man was not saying that the behaviour of the hairy caterpillars causes the mullet to run. If that were the case, then if you wanted fish, what you would do is go hunting for hairy caterpillars and stir them up, and then you could race over and get the fish.

But his people had been observing the patterns in nature on Stradbroke Island for at least ten thousand years. And they have learned that when the hairy caterpillars are active, the mullet are running. In other words, you have hairy caterpillars and you have mullet, and they're both part of a much larger network of conditional relationships. Within this network, there are specific patterns that can be discerned and relied upon. And such a pattern can be acted upon, and you get a result from this action.

So in terms of the meditation, let's give a very mundane example. I'm doing breathing meditation and I realize that when I focus on my breathing with great determination, my shoulders get tight. That's interesting. So I experiment by relaxing my effort and I discover that my shoulders relax. I'm seeing a pattern. And when I practice in accordance with this pattern, my experience changes. And it may change in ways that lead to my welfare.

So when we practice mindfulness, what we're doing is being continuously aware over a period of time, and we uncover these patterns within our experience. And over time, we get to understand how these patterns unfold.

So this is the middle way, dependent arising, and these are closely linked to the Buddha's teaching of anatta, not-self. And not-self is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the Buddha's teaching to understand, partly because it goes against all of our assumptions and habits.

To us, self is perfectly obvious. I mean, after all, who decided to come to this retreat? Who is doing this practice? Who is listening to this talk? It's obvious that the answer to all these questions is me, myself. So how can I deny any self?

And not-self is also difficult to understand and to experience because it's not a something. It's the absence of something. So the understanding of not-self is part of the arising of insight. And as we've talked about before, for the Buddha, insight is always insight into the three universal characteristics of experience: anicca, dukkha, anatta. All experience is changing. All experience fails to satisfy. All experience is not-self.

Now these three characteristics, as we mentioned before, are always listed in this order, and this gives an impression that they constitute some kind of hierarchy listed in order of seniority. But while they are listed separately, they arise together. They're like different sides of a three-sided coin. If one is present, all are present. And the fact is, all are present at every time and in every situation. They describe what is happening and what is unavoidable.

So our nature expresses the fact of change. And change is beyond our control because we cannot control nature. And in the same way, we cannot control our own experience. So, for example, meditation experience. We might try to organise things so that every sitting period is marked by calm and concentration, but we cannot make that happen.

Experience changes because of nature, which means it changes because of a much wider system of dynamic dependence. And because we want to control our lives, this inability to impose control is painful. This is dukkha.

And who is the one in charge? Who is the controller? It's self. If I cannot find anyone in charge of me and my life, I am experiencing not-self. I'm experiencing the absence of the controller. Because for the Buddha, self is the one who is in charge of experience. But the Buddha is saying we cannot find anyone in charge.

We keep looking for the hidden commander, and we keep issuing commands in his or her name. But no commander is ever actually found.

Recognizing not-self is very delicate. Self seems real. We have always assumed it is there. It appears to be a good working hypothesis that explains our experience. But the weird thing is that when we look for it, we can never pin it down.

So recognizing not-self is different from recognizing the first two characteristics—change, pain, anicca, dukkha. Because change is a something; we can point to it. Pain is a something; we can point to it. But not-self is not a something. It is an absence. It's an empty space where we assumed something lurked. And it's more difficult to recognize an absence than it is to recognize a presence.

Imagine going to a party where you expect to see your friends. And let's assume you have many friends. It's easy to recognize those who have come, those who are present. It's more difficult to recognize those who are absent. And it's more difficult still to sense their absence as part of the general background of experience.

Now, this dynamic might be seen in the problem of finding right effort in our practice, which we've been talking about this week. Have you ever found yourself striving to do this practice correctly, and either praising yourself for getting it right or blaming yourself for getting it wrong?

When we have this attitude to our practice, it indicates we are practicing what the Buddha calls wrong effort, micchā vāyāma. And why is it wrong? It's wrong in the context of path because this kind of effort sends us in the wrong direction. And where does wrong effort come from? It comes from our determined assumption that there is someone here who is making all this effort—the one who should be getting things right and who is a failure if things go wrong. And who is the one responsible for this project? Self.

When we're caught in the ups and downs of the practice, or when we're caught in the ups and downs of life, what we're caught in is the ups and downs of self. The practice becomes problematic when I, the practitioner, get in the way.

This is one reason why we've been emphasizing the importance of relaxation. Relaxation is important in the practice because when we strive to get things right or regret that we got things wrong, we are imposing a self between us and our intuitive recognition that we are already aware. We do not have to try to be aware. We are already aware. We have forgotten our awareness, although the awareness is already here.

And so we make too much effort. We get lost in our concepts about our experience and lose touch with the experience itself. We're lost in concepts of right and wrong, concepts of winning and losing. All of this distracts us from what is actually happening. And all of these concepts naturally arise from a sense of self.

With the self in charge of the project, we find ourselves trying to make something happen—which means

we have a view or an image of what should be happening. I should be concentrated. I should be staying with my breath. I should not be thinking. And then we struggle to realize this view, to make this image into a felt reality. This creates tension and conflict. But the very struggle hides the fundamental fact of awareness itself.

All of this comes from the dominance of our sense of self, the one who's in charge of the project. This is one reason why Tejaniya is such an interesting teacher, because he really zeros in on this. In his book *When Awareness Becomes Natural*, he quotes his own teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, who said: "Don't try to do anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening."

Very interesting: Don't try to do anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening. This is the description of right effort—effort as part of the middle way, effort when there is no one interfering with the practice, no one getting in the way.

So what we have to do, if we can say that we have to do it, is get out of the way. How do we get out of the way? One possibility is that we can get out of the way through the role of saddhā, usually translated as faith or confidence.

Let's zero in on this key term. Saddhā is the Pali word. Sometimes you see it translated as faith, sometimes as confidence, sometimes as trust. The word comes from the root *da*, to put or to place, combined with *shrad*, which is an old Vedic word for heart. In Vedic Sanskrit, *shrad* becomes in Pali *sad*. So saddhā means to place the heart—as in the sense of putting our heart into something. "I put my heart into this." Or it can mean to place in the heart, as we say, taking something to heart. Saddhā is about the heart connection with what we take to be real.

And notice: it is not belief. This is really important. It's about a felt connection with reality. Belief is cognitive. Saddhā is not cognitive—it's affective. It's in the heart, not the head. This is really important. In our modern world, if someone uses the term faith, we assume this means accepting impossible beliefs because someone tells us to. But this is not saddhā. If saddhā really is faith, it's probably closer to faith in the sense of being faithful to someone or to something.

Let's say we commit ourselves to a relationship with another person. We agree implicitly or explicitly to be faithful to that person. Now this does not mean we believe impossible things about him or her. It means that we are committed to this relationship in such a way that it shapes our way of life. It provides us with a sense of direction, a sense of what is important and what is not so important. And therefore it provides us with a felt basis for the decisions that we make. This is closer to what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about saddhā.

In the teaching, the Buddha pairs saddhā with paññā. Paññā is wisdom or understanding. The word is based on the root *ñā*, to know, to understand, and you get the prefix *pa*, which acts as an intensifier. Paññā has a wide range of application. It's closely related to sati, mindfulness. Often when the Buddha

talks about mindfulness practice, he uses a compound word, *sati sampajañña*. Sampajañña is again from the same root, *ñā*. It's a kind of entry-level understanding. If I'm tracking experience over time, I get to understand it—a very basic, ordinary, ground-level understanding. This is sampajañña. But in all of its forms, paññā, understanding, is not affective. It's cognitive. It's in the head, not the heart.

Together, saddhā and paññā, faith and understanding, when they come together represent an alliance between the affective and the cognitive, between the head and the heart, within the person, to the point where, when they mature, they become virtually indistinguishable.

This comes out in one discourse, the Āpaṇa Sutta, "At Āpaṇa." When the Buddha was staying at a place called Āpaṇa, he asked Sāriputta to teach on the five indriyas, or faculties. Now Sāriputta was one of his chief disciples, foremost in wisdom. The indriyas, the faculties—this is a list. As you know, Buddhism is full of lists. And it's actually a list within a list: saddhā, viriya, sati, samādhi, paññā. Faith, energy, mindfulness, immersion, and wisdom or understanding. This list takes the familiar three aspects of the Eightfold Path that deal with meditation—energy, mindfulness, concentration or immersion—

And at one end you have saddha, faith, and on the other end you have wisdom, understanding, paññā. These flanking positions are very important. The Buddha really was a connoisseur of a good list.

So Sariputta goes through the list, starts with faith, energy, and so on. And he says faith is directed towards the Buddha and the Buddha's awakening. Now what does he mean? Does he mean that one believes in it? Hallelujah, I believe? No, he's talking about the felt sense of the reality of awakening. The felt sense. Which means the felt sense of the real possibility for me of awakening.

And you notice the sense of reality, at least in potential. If I have saddha, whatever I have saddha in must be sufficiently real for me to act upon it. So let's say that I think Buddhism is great, Dharma is great, Buddha is great, and I've got nice Buddha images at home and a whole library of Dharma books, and I can discourse learnedly about the Buddha's teaching—but I don't know about going to a retreat. I mean, it's pretty tough. And besides, I'm quite busy. So, no. There are no actions. Such a person might have belief in what all these books are saying, but he does not have saddha.

But if a person feels, "I've got no idea whether this Buddhism business is real or not, but I've got to find out, and the only way I can find out is by diving into the practice"—that person has saddha.

So Sariputta starts with saddha, then he goes through the three factors of the Eightfold Path, and then he finishes up with paññā, understanding, which he says is directed towards understanding dependent origination. And then he sums up. He's gone through the list—one, two, three, four, five. He's taken a linear journey, starting with faith and ending with understanding.

And then he does something quite unexpected. He goes back to the beginning of the list. He says, "Striving again and again, being mindful again and again, unifying her mind again and again, and understanding again and again." Do you notice the "again and again"? He doesn't think this is going to be done in five

minutes. "A cultivated student's heart is firmly placed in this way. Those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them clear through. This is her faculty of faith."

That's a very interesting definition. "Those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them clear through." Things are touched with the body and seen clear through. "Things" translates dhammas—events, phenomena, the experiences that arise.

So what we appear to be seeing are two different modalities of experience. Touching suggests feeling, seeing suggests understanding. Touching suggests intimacy, seeing suggests detachment. Touching suggests heart, seeing suggests head. In other words, when we have mature saddha, mature faith, it is almost indistinguishable from wisdom, from understanding.

So the Buddha says, "A cultivated student's heart is firmly placed in this way." The verb translated as "firmly placed" here is abhisadahati, which adds the intensifying prefix abhi to the verb "to entrust one's heart." So it's not a case of faith now and develop wisdom later. Faith here, understanding there. Faith and understanding at war with each other. And that's very much the Western heritage.

But rather both are present, they are equal, but they are different. Saddha, faith, is intimate and physical. It's an affective relationship with reality. Understanding sees right through. It's a cognitive relationship with reality. And both are central to the path.

You notice that what we've been talking about over this week, we've been emphasising the understanding. And one of the meditators in an interview said, "It's very dry, this practice." That's exactly right. In the tradition it is called the way of dry insight. You're right, it is dry. So head and heart, affective and cognitive, understanding and faith—how do they relate to the practice?

The Buddha looks at the practice through two broad categories of samatha and vipassana, serenity and insight. You notice again here the joining of head and heart. Serenity represents the heart's connection with the practice. And when we connect serenity with not-self in the mental way, we may begin to recognise an interesting pattern.

Before I go on about this, I want to tell you of an observation that I made many years ago when I first started teaching in Malaysia. For a number of years, I would go every year and teach, or most years, at a place called SBS outside of Taiping in Malaysia—SBS standing for Sasanaraka Buddhist Sanctuary. The meditators were Chinese Malaysians. The first time I went there, there's this big hall. I've never been there before, so I'm a bit nervous. I go in, I do my performance, and they all listen. They're too shy to ask any questions. Then they meditate, and it seems to be pretty good. Then they leave the meditation hall and they go, "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah" to each other. They come back to the meditation hall and they meditate. They leave the hall, "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

I'm looking at this and I'm horrified. My God, this is terrible. This is a disaster. Because in Australia, if people were talking like this, it would be completely hopeless. The whole practice would collapse. But I

couldn't help but notice that it didn't bother them. They walk along the path, "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," head into the hall, right in there. It was pretty weird.

Over the years, I just kept looking at this and kept wondering, why is it that as a cohort, as a population, Malaysian Chinese find samadhi much easier than Australians? Much easier. What is it? I pondered this and came up with a hypothesis, and I present it purely as a hypothesis, not even a theory. But my hypothesis is this: your typical Malaysian Chinese meditator, when he or she goes deeply within themselves, they know, "I am not alone." And I think the typical Australian meditator, when they go deeply within themselves, knows fundamentally, "I am alone." I think this is the difference.

The sense of presence, of intimacy, versus aloneness, clearly can be influenced by social conditions. But it suggests something deeper, because intimacy is characteristic of the experience of the middle way and of not-self.

So let's go back to the self. Who is the self? It's the one who separates from experience in order to shape it according to his or her demands. The self is the one who judges experience as good or bad, as successful or failed.

For example, we come to the practice hearing about these distant, far-off ideals of enlightenment and awakening. We may be moved by these ideals, sufficiently moved to embark upon the practice. This movement is faith, it's saddha. Yet we doubt. And in our doubt, what we do is try to wrestle our experience to the floor. We try to make our experience conform to our desires and our wishes, and usually we fail. So we experience dukkha and we get trapped in wrong effort. We are determined to bring things under our control, the control of the self, and therefore we resist our intuitive recognition of not-self—which again is part of the three characteristics, always present.

But what if we surrendered into not-self? What if we stopped struggling? What if we really began to open to the fact of awareness itself? To the fact of intimacy itself? And how experience flows when we are intimate.

I'm reminded of an event that took place—well, I used to say years ago, but now it's last century, last millennium. I was practicing in Burma, and at that particular time, John Hale, who was a good friend and one of my main teachers, was practicing at the same center. Actually, he was practicing at the branch center. He finished his retreat and came back to the main one where I was, hanging out for a few days before going home.

And there was something about him. I think we could call it enlightenment, which people found incredibly attractive. It was like bees to honey. People just gathered around him and hung out with him.

One day I saw an interaction between John and a Thai yogi. This particular practitioner was very dedicated, really dedicated. But very rational in his approach. He was an ex-sportsman and a coach, very successful. And in his coaching, he knew it was all about getting the right technique for the player. If the

players could master the right technique, they'd win the game. So he was really concerned about having the best technique. Whenever he would meet a meditator who impressed him, he'd go up and question them. He accumulated vast realms of data. He even recorded his own interviews with the teachers.

And he zeroed in on John. He wanted to talk to him. And he had one basic question: What is your technique? How do you do it?

John would look at him with vast compassion. And all he would say was, "It's already available."

"Yes, yes, yes, but what is your technique?"

"It's already available."

"Yes, yes, sure, sure, but what do you do?"

"It's already available."

And that's all he would say. It was really interesting because the poor yogi was getting more and more frustrated. He couldn't get this at all.

When we relax while remaining aware, we recognize something. And what do we recognize? We recognize that what we are looking for is already here. Perhaps it's been looking for us.

But this can't be true, we protest. Because what is already here is painful and unsatisfactory. But so what? What does it matter what judgment or what assessment we place on top of our experience? The fact is, it's already available.

And perhaps we can get a felt sense of this more readily when we become more intimate with the awareness. We're talking about awareness of awareness. One way of looking at it is when we direct awareness to our experiencing, our aware-ing, rather than what we experience, what we are aware of. Because in awareness itself, there is no judgment. There's just awareness. There's just this world, now. There's just intimacy.

And in intimacy, nothing more is needed.

We experience this in our everyday lives when, for whatever reason, we let go of our habitual concepts and judgments and just surrender. Sometimes we do this, for example, when we love. And sometimes we do this when we relax.

In this retreat, we've talked about the importance of relaxation, but of course love is also central. So each night we recite the Karaniya Metta Sutta. And what is metta? Essentially, it is love. Because when we love, we surrender. And when we surrender, we discover we are already held.

And this is the invitation to Dharma. Dharma itself invites us. We don't have to fight to enter Dharma. We

don't have to prove ourselves worthy. We just need to surrender and accept the invitation that is already moving us. We just need to recognise that we are not alone. We are already with Dharma. And Dharma includes everything and everyone.

So how do we practice when we know we are held? We get out of our own way. There's no need to struggle. There's no need to fear failure. We just feel the intimacy of this, which is happening now, and which needs no justification and no apology. No special technique. It's simply this, simply now. And nothing more is needed. And in fact, nothing more is possible. We have arrived.

So just relax. Notice what is here. And surrender into it.

And when we get a felt sense of this, when the heart opens to Dharma, we get an understanding of what the Buddha was talking about when he spoke about entering the stream. Instead of struggling to stay afloat, we relax into the current. Instead of diligently swimming upstream, we cruise downstream. So we stay awake and watchful, but we relax into our wakefulness.

We've got nowhere else to go. And this right here is enough.

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