Closing

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 41:53

So here we are at a particularly exciting time of transition, what we often conceptualize as the end of the retreat and the return to everyday life. I would like to offer an alternate framework this morning, which is not so much the end of the retreat, but just a change of conditions. An invitation to continue the retreat in everyday life.

Essentially, the practice that we've been exploring here over the last nine days is meditation as a way of being. I hope that over this time, you've been able to get a bit of a sense of the truth that awareness is always available—that it's available no matter what is presenting to awareness or no matter what activity we're engaged in. And wherever awareness is available, then so too insight and wisdom are available. So these are available in the midst of everyday life.

This was something that I really learned from Sayadaw U Tejaniya. For those of you who are familiar with his teaching and perhaps have read his book, which is partly autobiographical, I think this really comes through so strongly in the way he recounts his experience of deepening into the practice over the course of his life. His book is called *When Awareness Becomes Natural*, for anyone who wants to follow it up.

He had lots of periods of intensive meditation in the meditation center of his teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw. But he was constantly pulled back out into everyday life, often by his family because he had family commitments to uphold in the family business. As Patrick mentioned at an earlier point in the retreat, he had a pretty wild and colourful life. He was very much a layperson battling with the chaos and messiness of life.

His practice really deepened when he was battling with a very severe depression. He would take refuge in the meditation centre for months at a time, but he found that when he returned to lay life, when his father came to call him back to help manage the family business, the depression would return. Eventually he understood that the only way through this depression was to understand it, to bring awareness and insight to it—in the midst of it, in the midst of the turmoil. And so he describes the different strategies and ways that he had for really making the challenges of life central to the practice.

One that I really appreciate is this: his family business involved his father being a cloth merchant with a market stall in the central markets of Yangon. A really busy, noisy, chaotic, colourful environment. Sayadaw U Tejaniya used to find it very overwhelming when what his heart was yearning for was practice and he was dealing with depression and he needed to be in this environment working and dealing with customers and all of the overwhelming sensory stimuli. He tells how he used to walk around with a Vicks inhaler stuck up one nostril. It was a mindfulness reminder, a strong sensory input to remind him to be

aware—just remember to be aware. Apparently when people asked him about it, he would say he had hay fever or something like that. But this was his creative way of doing whatever he needed to do to build remembering awareness into everyday life. And of course, as I've said a number of times through this retreat, we get better at what we practice. So with practice, over time, this skill of cultivating awareness in daily life can grow.

This is my encouragement to you: to think about what practice means in everyday life differently, to be creative with it, and to think about it as a daily life retreat. Where we simply, patiently, and with a sustained but light touch effort, practice over and over again to bring awareness into what we're doing.

It will feel very different, of course, so it's important not to have expectations. It will be much more difficult because the situation is different—it's a less conducive situation to drop into deep awareness and deep samādhi. And it's really important that we don't judge success in practice in everyday life on whether or not awareness is continuous. Achieving continuity of awareness isn't important. If we think that's the goal, then we're just swapping out one expectation about ideal meditation with another. We're just swapping out the idea of continuity of awareness through every activity for the previous ideal we might have held—that somehow when I sit down every morning to do my meditation practice, I'm going to enter a thought-free, blissful, jhānic realm for a while, and then I'll go about my day.

It's not that achieving a special meditation state in everyday life is what's going to catapult us out of suffering. It's that we have the intention and the commitment to cultivate increasing intimacy with the present, which we carry through our everyday life. And over time, that transforms the way that we are in the world.

Some tips about the practicalities of practice once we go home. Yesterday I introduced the technique of fifty-fifty awareness, and maybe you had the opportunity to practice a little with that, play a little bit with that. If that resonates for you, then that's a really helpful concept to take home. It makes it more achievable. We go about our day, we've still got to invest our mental energy in what we're doing, but we can retain some portion of our mental energy just to remember to be aware.

Another one that's really helpful is this idea of tapping the light switch of awareness. That really emphasizes the light touch effort. Wise effort in practice in everyday life is simply remembering to be aware now—just tapping the light switch of awareness whenever we notice it's dark again.

And again, that's what's important. That is what's conditioning the mind to choose awareness in future moments. And over time, the light switch will start to remain on for longer and longer.

So it's tapping the light switch that's the sign of progress. It's not whether I can stay continuously aware over the course of an activity. It's looking back and saying, "Well, do I remember to tap the light switch more often these days?" That's the sign of progress in the practice.

Be interested in the times where the mind chooses not to be aware. Notice what they are for you. For me,

it's rushing. Sometimes I can see the mind—an unexpected deadline comes up, suddenly you've got far less time to get out of the house than you realized you had. And it's like the mind sort of teeters on the brink and then thinks, "Oh well, I'll pick up the awareness practice later because this is really important. I've just got to get us out the door."

Or maybe it's when anger arises. Identification with view, position, righteousness. Like, "Oh yeah, I can see the anger arising, and it's quite interesting to watch that. But I might just make sure that the other person understands that my view is actually the correct view. And then I'll come back and watch the aversion."

So noticing this in a playful way—this is an opportunity to laugh at ourselves and to ask: Is it ever helpful to make the choice not to be aware? Notice the consequences of when the mind chooses awareness and when the mind chooses not to be aware. Is it ever actually helpful to choose not to be aware?

Similarly, celebrating the moments of knowing throughout the day. This one is so important. Often people come to me in interviews and say something like, "Oh look, I must admit I'm not a very good meditator when I get off retreat. I find it really hard to keep up the daily practice. I probably haven't even been sitting for the past few months." And then they pause and say, "It is interesting though—when I go out for a walk or do this or that activity, I do notice that I'm quite aware. I really can get a sense of the flow of sensations." And then they describe awareness of direct experience.

So again, it's about these limiting conceptions that we have about what the practice is. Celebrate the times when awareness is present, either because we have remembered and tapped the light switch, or—even more interesting—when we haven't even remembered and awareness has already returned. We can really tune into this, particularly in the days following this retreat, because awareness will be returning without being invited or remembered. The practice is happening naturally. This is the naturalness of the practice. It's actually not the self who does the practice. So really notice that and celebrate it and savor it, because that is the practice unfolding naturally.

Treat life like a retreat—the retreat of daily life. In a retreat, we don't give up entirely when we drop the ball for a few minutes, do we? Otherwise you wouldn't still be here. So bring the same slow and steady commitment to it in everyday life.

A couple more things about dedicated practice time, or formal practice time, because this is always the question that's foremost in people's minds at the end of a retreat: How long should I sit for?

You've probably guessed it's not much good asking me that question, because I like to emphasize the equal importance of all four postures. So when someone asks me how long to sit for—if sitting works for you and you really like it, great. It's a wonderful practice to help cultivate the momentum of awareness and samādhi in daily life. If you enjoy sitting, then sit, and it doesn't matter how long you sit for.

But if you struggle with sitting and you're asking how long you should sit for because you think you can at

least know you've ticked off being a good yogi if you manage to stay there till the end of that session—then I would say, try something different. Be creative. Do your formal practice in a different posture. Find a way to connect with the practice that is enjoyable and nourishing and makes you want to do it on successive days.

Formal practice is very useful, very, very useful. But formal practice doesn't have to be sitting on the cushion with eyes closed until a timer goes off.

Formal practice can be in any of the four postures: sitting, standing, lying, or movement. It's very freeing and very good for developing our sense of independence and trust in the practice if we actually do go home and play with it a bit.

In the middle years of my practice—over the couple of two and a half decades that I've been practicing—the first phase I was just trying to get on the cushion and judging myself very harshly for not doing it very well. Then in the middle years it was a time of real creativity and experimentation. I knew that I needed formal practice to sustain the momentum in everyday life, and I would just try different things for periods of time.

There was one time when I was living in Sydney in an apartment and didn't have much time because I had a long commute to and from work every day. So I thought, well, how can I do formal practice and also get outdoors and move my body each day? I combined the two. The formal practice was this forty-minute loop—I'd make the intention to leave, be aware, and then I would leave the house and do this brisk walk alongside the joggers and the prams and everything down near the river and back to the house. That was my formal practice time.

Another time in that same situation in Sydney, I dropped the daily practice for a while, and instead every second Sunday I had a retreat day. I took the eight precepts, and I didn't have much structure to the day, but the eight precepts were there to provide a retreat container. I could really go deeper into the practice, and then the rest of the time in that fortnight it was just taking little opportunities here and there.

When my kids were little, my formal practice time became lying in bed next to them while they fall asleep—which, for anyone who's done that, is not particularly conducive. It sounds warm and still, but it's definitely not still. And often inside it's not very warm.

So play with it. Play with what works. That's what we're looking for here, just like we've been talking about through the retreat as well.

Sometimes when I run natural awareness courses where people zoom in or come to the meditation center once a week and then the rest of the time they're in their everyday life, what we do in the first session is have people work in pairs to set up a kind of daily life retreat structure for themselves that they're going to integrate into everyday life. The idea is that it's not adding in anything. It's not adding extra pressure to your day.

What I get people to do is identify three activities in daily life that are going to become their meditation sessions for the duration of the course. The three activities you pick are really up to you, and it depends what you want to focus on and what you think will work for you. They can range from a formal session, like a half-hour sit, through to something much simpler. I do suggest at least one of them is a formal period, which I define as a period of time where the only purpose is to be aware, to meditate. It doesn't matter really what you're doing with your body.

So a formal practice, and then two others. At the more conducive-for-meditation end of the scale would be an activity that doesn't require interpersonal communication, isn't on a screen, involves some mundane and repetitive movement with the body, and not much cognitive work. It could be taking the dog for a walk or unpacking the dishwasher, that kind of thing.

But then you can move right up to the other end of the spectrum and select an activity that's much more challenging, if you feel like that's where you want to stretch yourself. We did that speaking and listening activity yesterday. Maybe it's picking a particular communication that you have each day and bringing awareness to that. Maybe it's the first ten minutes that you open your computer in the morning, when you're checking your emails. You can be infinitely creative with it, and you tailor it to how it can both support your connection with awareness of the present and also how it can stretch you and work on your gaps.

Be creative with the supports. Stick a Vicks inhaler up your nose if that works. Use mindfulness bells. Sometimes—I think I've experimented with this, and sometimes people say this—instead of a particular activity, it could be a particular time of day. Maybe a bell goes off and forty-five minutes later there's another bell, and it's this time in the morning where you're just kind of pottering around your house. That could be a time instead of a specific activity.

The importance of reviewing your practice—I can't emphasize enough. We don't want to be too entangled in conceptual analysis while we're practicing, but reviewing how it's going is another part of remembering the practice. It helps to inspire us and it helps us to clarify what's going on in our practice and where the gaps are. So again, you can put something in place to remind you. It could be that a little bell goes off around the time you go to bed that just reminds you to reflect on the practice. This is not about judging what you didn't do. It's just about remembering the importance of this project and having that intention carry you into the next day. Journaling, if journaling is helpful.

The important thing is that however you practice in everyday life, it is enjoyable. It needs to be enjoyable. That's what will make it sustainable. So I really encourage you to be creative with daily practice. The only daily life practice that's not valuable is feeling guilty about not practicing.

A couple of other things I want to mention. I think I've used this phrase a couple of times through the retreat: that really this practice opens us up so that we can invite in everything—all of who we are, all of how we are—so that we can use the chaos and messiness of life as the grounds for practice.

Dukkha—unsatisfactoriness, pain, suffering—as it manifests in our everyday lives can be a great support for the practice. It can be like a mindfulness bell. We can develop a sensitivity to the movements of the heart and a sensitivity for when suffering is arising that increases our curiosity and the quality of our awareness.

I started to notice the pattern that I had with anxiety. It might be that some incident triggered it—sometimes it doesn't even seem like an incident triggered it at all. But something might happen that triggers anxiety, which is essentially the energy of fear. The flavour of anxiety and its associated storyline is one of being unsafe. Some aspect of my life feels unsafe or has made me feel unsafe.

So this gets triggered and there's this feeling of lack of safety—the lack of reliability of life, right? And then what happens is that the mind constructs a story to fit the emotion. I've now learned that when there's that feeling in the heart, it's important just to notice it and recognise it. And to know that if there is a movement where the heart reaches out and grabs onto one aspect of my life, then of course the narrative is going to be that that aspect of my life is unreliable and unsafe—whatever it is, whether it's something to do with my job or my kids or anything else.

Dukkha can be like a mindfulness bell that alerts us: "Oh yeah, got to pay real close attention to what's going on."

It's also important to notice that just because we make unskillful choices doesn't mean that we're not practicing. We can be aware of unskillful choices while we're making them. Okay, it might be slightly disappointing to see ourselves making those same unskillful choices for the millionth time, but it's not wasted. The awareness of it unfolding is never wasted. It's gathering data—gathering data for the mind, for it to finally put together and understand.

One final thing I'll mention is about devices, because these are such a difficult feature of our lives today. Sometimes people say, "That sounds good, but what about working on a screen? When I'm using a screen, how can I possibly be aware?" And of course, like interpersonal communication, this is one of the really difficult areas. But again, it doesn't mean we can't play with it.

If tuning into awareness of seeing is something that works for you, this can be incredibly helpful when we're on screens, because of course seeing is the primary sensory activity that's going on. We can be aware that we are looking at the screen. We bring that in when we remember, we bring it in at the beginning, and okay, we forget. But we're strengthening the capacity to be aware.

Being aware of body can also be very useful—being aware that there actually is a body here that's interacting with the screen, because so often we're completely oblivious to that. And also being aware of the heart. If I'm scrolling the news, when is enough? It's pretty full on, checking out the news. So when is enough? Tuning into: "Actually, that's enough now." Or the same with scrolling Facebook. When is the awareness really just getting sucked into mindless activity? So tuning into the heart—and again, just not

having expectations, but also not assuming that because it's a difficult activity I just won't go there. You play around the edges. When doing computer work, just checking in occasionally: is the body relaxed or is there tension?

Gradually, over time, no moment of awareness is ever wasted. Because every moment of awareness is seeing—you know, we were talking about insight the other night—seeing and understanding. Every moment of awareness is seeing, because we're coming back to direct experience and we're seeing it. So it's gathering the data, gathering the data, so that eventually the understanding emerges.

And it's also exposing the citta, the heart-mind, to a more wholesome state of being, so that the citta will start to naturally choose that more wholesome state of being in future moments. A moment of awareness that I've remembered by tapping the light switch or checking in with the body while I'm on the computer will condition a natural arising moment of awareness in the future.

I think that's all I've got to say. Patrick, do you want to add to that?

Sadhu. Sadhu. Sadhu.

In that case, any questions? It can get a bit much when you get a whole load of ideas for the practice.

"Do you recommend incorporating some metta somewhere along the line?" someone asked. "I used to keep a gratitude diary, and I found that really good, but of course, like everything else, it fell by the wayside."

Metta is fantastic. If you have a connection with metta practice, it's wonderful for nourishing the heart. And the underlying theme of what I've been saying is that you want to find a way to nourish the heart, because that is what will inspire you to sustain a connection to the practice.

We don't explicitly teach metta in these retreats. In the way that Patrick and I practice, well, perhaps I'll speak for myself. Everyone knows I'm full of metta. I actually use metta as a meditation object quite a lot, but I use it when it arises spontaneously. That's why I tend not to teach it—I haven't come to it through an explicit framework or technique. But it's a great practice for nourishing the heart, absolutely.

The things I've mentioned are examples, but the underlying message is this: be creative and trust what you know about your own practice. Do whatever inspires you to stay connected to the practice, to stay connected to the present moment. And if the invitation to consider so many things is overwhelming, then trust that knowing in yourself that says, "I need to keep it simple." Choose one thing you know works and stick with it.

But remain open. If down the track it's not working—and you know it's not working because you're experiencing more guilt about not doing the practice than actually doing it—then choose one new thing and go with that.

"Because sometimes you can get just so many options," someone reflected. "Recently I thought I should be doing the five remembrances, but it's very hard to fit everything in."

Absolutely. If the choices are overwhelming you, choose one thing at a time and practice it. Commit yourself to it, but only as long as it's inspiring you to stay committed to your practice. When it stops inspiring you, choose one other thing and commit yourself to that.

Another question arose. "I apologise because I asked you this in my interview and I've forgotten the answer. I should take my notebook with me. Something external will come in, completely out of my control, and it will niggle me. And I'll be lost. I will. I'll watch myself get lost. I've watched myself think, 'I'm out of control, I can't even grab it.' In that moment, what do I do? Patrick suggested yesterday that I try to feel into it, but I can't find that in that moment because I'm stuck in anxiety."

When life throws its biggest challenges at us and we are completely overwhelmed with feeling, that is of course the most difficult moment to have any expectation that we're going to maintain continuity of awareness. It doesn't mean we can't try, but the key thing about our everyday practice is that the more we practice in a relaxed and gentle way when circumstances are not so extreme, the easier it's going to be when we meet extreme moments.

There are times when what life throws at us, and our reactions to those things, are so extreme that we intuitively know what we need right now is whatever it takes to soothe the heart. That doesn't mean we can't sometimes try to bring the practice into extreme situations, but be gentle on yourselves. Don't expect it to be easy.

When we do practice in the midst of extreme circumstances, the same principles apply that we've been working with on retreat. We're not interested in the storyline. We're interested in what's going on in the body and in the heart. So we don't worry about the storyline—we come back to the body and find what's happening here. What are the physical sensations? What are the feelings? Can we stay with the raw energy of the feeling?

But if we can't, because it's just too overwhelming, then that's fine. We do what we need to do to soothe ourselves, and we continue to practice in less extreme situations.

And that will gradually, over time, increase our capacity to be with more and more challenging feelings.

"That's really helpful, especially that part about having more compassion for myself in those moments. Not, for lack of a better word, beating myself up and feeling guilty—'How many more treats do you need to get over that one?' But yes, for me it's that beautiful piece around self-compassion. Soothing was a perfect word."

Yes, and there's nothing less soothing than being in a really extreme state, being very, very upset by something, and then a little voice in the back of your mind is going, "You can't even meditate now, you

know." That's not soothing. That is unskillful attitude.

"When I go home, when I go back to work, one of the things I'll need to remember is that the people at home and the people at work haven't been on retreat. They've stored up a lot of things that they want to ask me and talk with me about. And it may be that I'll be less reactive. Any hints for not being insufferable?"

One thing you could try is if someone's being caught up in something, you glare at them and you say, "Are you aware in that now? I find this great peace and tranquility."

I think basically you've just got to put up with it. There's so much more to work with. It's true, though, that if you're a meditator, you're part of a cultural minority. So you've just got to get used to dealing with people who are on a whole different framework.

I was reminded of this years and years ago. I went to a party being held by my brother, and one of his old mates was there. It was kind of rumoured among my brother's mates that I was some kind of guru. This sort of comes up at the party, and he says, "So you meditate, do you?" I said, "Yeah." "Why do you do that?"

And I said, "Because of dukkha."

"What, what?"

"Because of pain. I'm in pain, and everybody's in pain."

And he said, "I'm not. I don't have any pain. I've got no problem." And he hurried off.

To me, it illustrated the gap. There's this part of me that can never be shown. And that part of me is actually the most important part. But I want to maintain these connections. And so it's almost like I slide in. I'm an actor.

Actually, I'll remind my brother—I'm going to visit him after this. The second time he was married, we went out for bucks night. He and his old mates and me. And we met up at this club or something in the city, in Sydney. I came downstairs, and there they all were. Everyone had a glass of beer, and they were all shouting at each other and sloshing beer. And I'm standing there thinking, "Oh my God, what do I do? How am I going to survive this?" So I grabbed a glass of beer and started shouting. And I fit right in. Then after a few hours I was so exhausted I went back home.

But you adapt. You don't have to—the self is an actor, and we're playing different roles. And this is, I think, one thing that you start to recognise with the understanding of not-self: everybody's playing roles. Some people don't know that they're playing roles. But we do, because we can see it. So you play the role which is appropriate to that particular context. At least that's what I do. I try to do.

"That's perfect, because what I've noticed is other people can make me forget, and I get pulled into it."

Yes. That is very common.

And I've also noticed that people who are practicing awareness in the moment seem a bit not present to me.

Because they're playing a role. They're playing the role of the meditator.

Yeah. And I don't like that. There are few things more irritating than the good Buddhist.

Okay. And we're done.

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