Practising for Insight - with Patrick Kearney

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:15:54

Settling awareness in your body, feeling your body. You're listening or hearing the sounds—in this case the sound of the bell, the sound of my voice. You can see, unless you've got your eyes closed. And you can feel touch.

So let's say you're sitting in a chair. You can feel the contact of your feet on the floor perhaps. You can feel where your body is supported at the base of the body. If your chair has a back, you can feel the support at the back. So settle your awareness in these different sensations and just feel your body.

You notice the simplicity of what we're doing? Just feel what is happening. As you're feeling your body you might feel sensations, you might also feel the movements of your breathing. You don't need to give anything any particular importance, but just feel whatever is happening.

And of course, there's also thought buzzing about.

You might be telling yourself stories. Just let them go and come back to your body. Feel your body. Breathe and relax. Particularly on your exhalation, you might just relax. There's nothing to do. Just relax. And as you relax, feel your body. When thinking pops up, just notice that you are thinking, and come back to your body.

So try again and just listen. Notice how the sound comes and goes. It appears out of nowhere. It's present. And it disappears.

Have you noticed that your body's sensations do the same thing? They appear, they do their thing, and then they disappear. You might notice that your thoughts are doing the same thing. They appear, they do their thing, and they disappear. Just notice how things are coming and going, appearing and disappearing.

Did your attention wander off? What's happening now? You don't need to get anywhere. You just have to remember what's happening now. It could be sensation, could be thought, could be sound. It doesn't matter. But what's happening now? What is clear now? What is obvious now?

Have you been distracted? What's happening now? And is what's happening now appearing? Is it doing its thing? And then is it disappearing? Notice those movements—how things come and go, including your attention that comes and goes. Don't fight it. Just be interested and watch it.

What is clear now? What is obvious now? Come back to your body. Feel sensation. Come back to your mind. Feel thinking. Notice how things appear, and then they dance, and then they cease. Watch them as

they come and go.

So that was a kind of brief foray into what we could call an insight meditation style of practice. What I'd like to do now is launch into the talk, in which we explore practicing toward insight.

As you know, when the Buddha talks about meditation, he talks about meditation for serenity, *samatha*, and he talks about meditation for insight, *vipassanā*.

And you get a whole range of different techniques. Some specialise in one, some specialise in the other, some blend them. So here we're going to talk about practising for insight in the context of the Mahasi lineage.

We're talking about the teaching of Mahasi Sayadaw, a Burmese monk who lived from 1904 to 1982. He was one of the great revivers of insight meditation in Burma, and his lineage has spread throughout the world. He's quite influential. So we're going to talk about how he understands the practice.

If you read English translations of his writings—of course he never spoke in English, he taught in Burmese—but his students translated into English, and what they emphasized as the center of the practice is the idea of noting, to note the meditation object. Now here, "to note," despite what it might suggest in English, in Burmese what it means is to directly aware whatever is happening.

For example, if I ring the bell and I ask, "Can you hear the bell?" what I'm asking you is: did you directly aware the sound? Can you feel the sensations of your body? Are you directly awareing the sensations of your body? Are you being distracted by thought? Can you watch the thinking? Can you aware the thinking? This is noting—directly awareing whatever is happening.

Now, this is incredibly simple. The simplicity of it is actually what makes it so difficult. Did anybody suffer from what we could call distraction? Did that happen for anyone? Perhaps not for this group, but in other groups, people would say yes, it happened quite frequently. It's difficult to actually simply directly aware whatever is happening, and especially to do it over a period of time.

But why is it difficult? It's difficult because we tend to get lost in our concepts about our experience rather than being intimate with the experience itself. We tend to live in the world of concept. We tend to live in a world in which what we take to be real is what we think is real, or what we assume is real. But what we want to do is move into a world in which we're simply interested in how this experienced event right now presents to me, what it does.

For example, I made certain suggestions. Have you noticed that sensations appear, and they dance, they sit? Have you noticed that thoughts appear, they dance, they sit? Now obviously I'm prodding you in a certain direction. In other words, do we notice that things change? And they change in ways that are beyond our control. How many people would say, "I was in absolute control of my experience during this meditation period"? Probably no one. We don't control experience. It changes, and it changes in ways that

are out of our control. The Buddha is constantly talking about this in terms of anicca, dukkha, anattā.

When we are lost in the world of concept, what we tend to do is become lost in judgement about our experience. My experience is good, my experience is not good. My experience is satisfying, my experience is disappointing, and so on. But when we stay with what this experience does, with how we are experiencing it, noticing its dynamism, then we become interested in the flow of experience, the structure of experience. We don't care whether it's good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, meditative or not meditative, because we recognise these are just ideas, these are just concepts. What I'm interested in is what's actually happening.

Now this takes us to the world of what the Buddha calls the dhammas—in Pali, the dhammas, plural. Of course you've all heard the Pali word dhamma; the Sanskrit and English equivalent is dharma. This Pali word dhamma has a variety of meanings. The Buddha's dhamma means the Buddha's teaching. Sometimes you see the word in the plural: dhammas, depending on whether we're talking Pali or Sanskrit.

When he uses it in the plural, what he means is how we experience things. Mahasi Sayadaw, for example, tells us that what we think is real, what "reality" comes to us in two forms. First, what we directly experience firsthand through the senses—and for the Buddha, of course, this includes mind.

So what we directly experience firsthand, and what comes to us indirectly, secondhand, through concepts about what we directly experience.

If I have any thoughts about my meditation practice, do you notice they're *about*? They're not the actual practice. They're thoughts about—they're secondhand, one step removed.

Now, for the Buddha, firsthand direct experience is associated with understanding and insight. Experience made up of secondhand concepts is associated with delusion and the suffering that accompanies delusion. This is really central, particularly for meditation.

In Theravāda Buddhism, direct firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, *paramattha*—which I think is spelled exactly the same as the centre of Sydney, but I think this is just coincidence. So direct firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, while secondhand experience—in other words, concepts about what we directly experience—is called conventional reality.

When we are practising meditation, when we are noting, when we are directly aware of whatever is happening—and this is the basic discipline of the practice—we're training ourselves to ground our perception in ultimate reality, in the world of directly experienced events, in the world of *dhammas*. And this is the world where insight arises.

Is this making sense so far? We're getting very technical, talking about ultimate reality and conventional reality. But it does boil down to what we directly experience and concepts about what we directly experience. And our habit is to live in this second world of concepts about.

Let me give you an example. Have you ever had the experience of having done a meditation session—might be one session, might be a whole retreat—you finish it and you think, "Well, that was a complete waste of time, wasn't it?" Have you ever had that experience? Have you ever thought, "Well, that was hopeless"?

But you notice that that is a judgement *about* the experience. It's not the experience. The experience itself is something different. It could be the experience of restlessness. "My mind was too restless, I couldn't settle down, therefore it's no good." But the direct experience of restlessness is ultimate reality. That's exactly what we're looking for. And yet we don't take that seriously.

We assume the experience should be something—like it should be blissful and meditative and lots of *samā dhi* and so on and so forth. We don't notice that all of that are just concepts. They're concepts about. They're not the actual experience. But we put all our importance into the concepts about, and we judge the direct experience insofar as whether or not it lives up to the standards set by the concepts.

But the concepts aren't important. What's important is the direct experience.

So the meditation practice involves the discipline of simply staying with the direct experience. That's all. Nothing more. That's the discipline. Very, very simple. Very, very difficult, because it goes against all our habits.

Now, what the Buddha is saying is that when we're practising for insight and we're just sticking with what is actually happening, we start to see change. We start to see *anicca*, impermanence. And we develop what the Buddha calls *anicca saññā*, the perception of impermanence, the perception of change. This is built into direct firsthand experience.

Normally, what we've been doing all our lives is training ourselves to live in the perception of permanence, of not-change. And what are we saying now? What you want to do now is actually develop the opposite perception—the perception of change.

Let's take a debate in contemporary Buddhism. Take, for example, a concept of something we have not directly encountered. Let's say rebirth. The Buddha teaches rebirth. Does this actually exist?

Is this doctrine true?

Now some people believe it, and they believe it because authoritative texts and teachers say it is true. Some people disbelieve it because it contradicts their belief in scientific materialism. And you find both of these positions being held by people who practice Buddhist meditation.

These two positions are diametrically opposed to each other. But what do they have in common? They're just concepts. Has anyone directly experienced rebirth? Now, some people claim to have memories of a previous life, but these memories are themselves concepts. They're creations of the mind. They may correspond to an actually encountered first-person experience that occurred in the past, or they may not.

But basically, they're just concepts.

And what do concepts have in common? All concepts, including concepts that completely disagree with each other—they appear as permanent, as *nicca*. Now, when the Buddha talks about permanent, he doesn't necessarily mean lasting forever and ever. He means lasting unchanged over time. This is what *ani cca*, not permanent, means for the Buddha: something that lasts unchanged over time, regardless of the unit of time.

Let's say, for example, that ten or twenty years ago I decided that the Buddha must be right—there is rebirth if he says so. Or let's say that ten or twenty years ago I decided that regardless of what the Buddha says, there is no rebirth; it's scientifically impossible. I've taken that position. Has this concept, and my relationship to this concept, changed over the past ten or twenty years? Apparently not. It's permanent—using permanent in the sense that the Buddha uses it: unchanging over time. And it's permanent because it's just a concept. Concepts are permanent in the sense that they remain stable over time.

Let's go back to our rebirth example. We don't spend all of our time thinking about rebirth, but let's say that you are one of those people who do not believe in rebirth. Now let's say you're listening to a dharma talk where the speaker says, "Look, rebirth is true, and if you don't believe it, you cannot be a Buddhist and you cannot gain enlightenment." As you listen to this talk, you may get agitated. Are you trying to propagandize me? Are you saying that I have to accept an orthodoxy I do not believe in order to succeed in this practice? What is happening? You are having a direct, first-hand experience of listening to this talk, and a direct, first-hand experience of the agitation that is arising from the listening.

Let's say that you're listening to this talk and you are a believer in rebirth. You think, "This is great—at last, someone's putting it down there." Then you may be having a direct, first-hand experience of satisfaction, a felt sense of confirmation of your belief and the satisfaction that the truth is finally being revealed.

Now, these experiences—listening to, responding to this talk—these experiences are direct, first-hand, and they are changing. They are not permanent. They do not last over time. If you listen to someone else saying the same thing the next night, the concept will be exactly the same. But the felt encounter with the talk, the responses that arise in mind and body, would be different from the previous night. These direct, first-hand experiences are not permanent. But concepts are stable. Concepts stay unchanged over time.

So when we normally live in the world of concepts, we live in a world of permanence. But the practice of noting, the practice of directly being aware of whatever is happening right now, reveals a world which is clearly impermanent, subject to change. And it's in this world that understanding can begin to emerge. Because for the Buddha, the perception of change is the entry into insight.

And of course, for the Buddha, that which is *anicca*, that which is changing and therefore unreliable, is *du*

kkha—inherently unsatisfactory. And that which is *dukkha* is not self. The recognition of these three universal characteristics constitutes insight.

Any questions? I know we're kind of jumping in the deep end here. Am I making sense?

One person thinks so. I'm glad we got one vote.

So let's move on.

In one very famous teaching, the Buddha says: *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā, sabbe dhammā anattā.* If you're looking for this, it's the Uppāda Sutta on Arising, in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of the Threes, number 136.

This could be translated as: all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are painful, all phenomena are not-self.

When the Buddha is talking about constructions, *saṅkhārā*, basically a construction is something that is put together, created. For example, this building that I'm in is a construction—someone built it. The building that you're in is a construction—someone built it. This meeting is a construction; we're all building it. This talk is a construction. So a construction is anything that's put together out of parts. And for the Buddha, anything that's put together out of parts, sooner or later, will fall apart. It will cease. This is simply built into the understanding.

So he says all constructions are impermanent and painful. If we ask what are constructions, what are *saṅkhārā*, the answer is basically everything—everything in the universe except for the unconstructed, the *asaṅkhata*, otherwise known as the not-born, the not-become, the not-made.

Hence the third statement: all phenomena are not-self. You notice that the constructions have disappeared and been replaced by phenomena. This translates *dhammā*—directly encountered events. And all of them are not-self. But notice they're not described as subject to change and dissatisfaction.

Now look at the claim being made: all constructions are impermanent. This is a very bold claim.

Let's say I am a dedicated practitioner of insight meditation. Let's say that whenever I'm directly aware of whatever is happening, I recognize that the experience I'm having—a *saṅkhāra*, a *dhamma*—I recognize it's impermanent, subject to change. In terms of my direct, first-hand experience, I can say: whenever I note, whenever I'm directly aware of something, whatever I note turns out to be impermanent, subject to change.

Would you agree with that? Have you ever been directly aware of something that never changed? Or have you found that every time you're directly aware of something, it changes?

Great.

But what about all of those constructed experiences that I have not noted? What about all of those experiences that occurred before I started meditating? What about all those experiences that will occur in the future? I haven't noted them. I haven't been directly aware of them. I have no direct first-hand experience of them. So any idea I have about them is what? It's a concept.

And doesn't that mean that any belief I have in their impermanence is just a return to the world of concepts? Isn't the Buddha, with all this instruction about staying directly with experience and not going into concept—doesn't he just take us to a paradox where at the end of it he expects us to take on a concept which we cannot possibly verify?

We've arrived at a paradox. We practice, we practice diligently to drop our second-hand experience of concepts and to stay with the direct, first-hand world of changing creation. And if we do it successfully, where does it take us? To more concepts—the concepts of universal impermanence, pain, and not-self.

Another way of looking at this is: have we done all this work just to end up with another belief structure?

Not only that, but according to the tradition, insight meditation strictly speaking begins when our meditation object is one or more of the three characteristics, the three universal characteristics.

But if the three characteristics are concepts, how do we note concepts? Isn't noting the practice that deconstructs concepts, that takes us to a world beyond concept? Isn't that the whole idea?

So we come across a paradox, and what we're going to do next talk is try to explore this paradox and see where it takes us. But this is the paradox that we're faced with. The whole training is all about dropping the concept, just staying with the actual experience. When we do that, we notice the actual experience is changing. And the Buddha goes beyond that. He says all experience is subject to change. But as soon as he makes that move, hasn't he just taken us back into a world of concepts? And what are we doing there?

So let's explore this in the next class. And explore it in your own meditation practice, and see what you come up with.

Question from the audience: Just on that last point, in terms of the practice, will it get to a stage where the three characteristics of anicca, anattā, and dukkha will no longer be concepts? They are what will be the direct experience—the direct experience of impermanence?

That's the idea. But how that works is quite mysterious, and this is what we want to explore. It will take us into the nature of awareness itself, which we haven't talked about much. So far, we've just been taking awareness for granted as if we know what it is.

Question: How are thoughts, perceptions, and feelings connected?

Ah, that's a very technical one. They're all part of the same general process of constructing a world. If you think about the Buddha's teaching on the senses—the six senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting,

touching, and minding—the Buddha calls this *sabba*, everything.

Now if you look at the five physical senses, each of them is a sensitivity. Take the eyes. There are two little parts of the body that are sensitive to light. My hand is not sensitive to light, but these two parts are, so they pick up visual data. The ears are sensitive to sound; they pick up audio data. And so on. Each sense is a sensitivity to a particular form of data.

The five physical senses each have their own unique streams of data. The eyes do not hear, the ears do not see. So you've got these five streams of data coming in towards us. Mind has its own unique data—what we've been calling the world of concept. But it also picks up the five streams of physical data. All of these streams flow into mind. And then the mind's job is to make meaning out of it, to create a meaningful world.

Take perception, for example. Perception is recognition. That gives us our sense of familiarity. I turn up in this quite mysterious phenomenon called the Zoom room, and I pretty soon pick up that this is the Buddhist meditation group. I can tell because you've got that mettā sign behind you. That's a clue. Now imagine someone who's never in their life had anything to do with meditation—they would not have the faintest idea what mettā means. They turn up and think, "What is going on here? I don't know what this is, who are these people?" Because the perception hasn't been worked out yet.

Perception is based on experience. A good example is language. If you're listening to your native language, you just understand what's being said. But if you've ever undertaken the job of learning a second language, you know how much work is involved to train the mind to recognize that this pattern of sound represents this meaning. That's the job of perception. Perception gives us a familiar world.

Feeling is the heart's response.

I like. I don't want. I want. I don't want. I don't know. I'm confused. I'm either ignoring or confused.

So perception is essentially cognitive—it gives me a world of meaning. Feeling is affective, of the heart. It tells me how I'm responding to this world. And thinking is a kind of higher-level processing that continues to make sense of it all, but in a more detailed way.

All of these factors, and others, are working together to create a sense of me in my world—in other words, a sense of what the Buddha calls self.

Does that make sense?

Yes, it does. And Patrick, earlier someone made this comment and question, perhaps connected to what you were just saying. This person says, "I've heard a bit about heart and brain coherence and connecting with your body. Can you speak a bit more about that?"

Heart and brain coherence in connecting with your body. Well, in the Western world, we're obsessed with

brains. We think that mind—when people talk about mind, you notice they often use the words mind, brain, and head interchangeably, as if they're the same thing. Just absolutely ridiculous. And of course, we have all this brain research, and things are popping away in the brain, and so on and so forth.

But there is a recognition that this misses out something. It misses out what the Buddha calls the affective—what we, in our culture, tend to call the heart. There's the cognitive aspect of experience and the affective aspect of experience, and the Buddha distinguishes these two aspects as well.

If you think about it, when the Buddha says, "What is the fundamental problem that we have?"—sometimes he'll say it's delusion or ignorance, *avijjā*, which is cognitive. Sometimes he'll say it's *taṇhā*, craving or drivenness, which is here in the heart, affective.

When the Buddha says, "What is the fundamental solution?"—sometimes he says it's *bodhi*, awakening, enlightenment, which is here, it's waking up, it's understanding: "Oh, this is what's going on." Sometimes he'll say it's *nibbāna*, which is the going out of the fire, which is here in the heart, affective.

So the human being has both of these aspects, and balancing them is very important in order to lead a balanced life.

Thank you, Patrick. We've got another question about what you were saying earlier about the paradox. "I don't understand why the paradox is such a major thing. Wouldn't it be the case that if I get to a stage in practice where I think I've let go of everything, but I am still aware of the paradox, then I simply haven't let go of enough and need to keep on meditating? A position that I've been in ever since I started meditating anyway."

That's an interesting statement. If one is still aware of a paradox, I think this is actually a very interesting state to be in, because it gives you something to pay attention to and makes things interesting.

So fantastic. Just keep meditating. And yeah, perhaps I'm just overstating my case to get my audience interested and to come back on the 27th of March. Otherwise I wouldn't get an invite to come back.

Next question: If we shouldn't obsess over labeling an experience as anything, and we should just experience it without judgment, then how do you fully appreciate the joy of it? Does joy naturally arise without judgment of the experience?

Basically, there's more room for joy when the judgment goes away. The problem with judgment—there's not a problem with judgment as such. My problem with our judgments is that most of them are based on the past. We are creatures of habit, and we come to this present experience now highly conditioned by the past, and this gets in the way of our actually experiencing.

What people will find when they practice—it's quite common on meditation retreats—is that there will come a time when the practitioner will say, "Oh, it's like..." They get a sense of the newness, the freshness of experience. It's like they step out of the meditation hall and think, "It's like I've never been here before."

It's new, it's fresh. There's spaciousness and joy in that, because the past is not floating onto them. They're just genuinely present. And then, of course, that involves a judgment: "Yeah, this is nice. I should keep doing this." So the judgment itself is not the problem. The problem is that most of our judgments are heavily conditioned by the past. And of course, that means by our delusions and attachments.

Patrick, would you say that because of that judgment, it's almost like that commentary that we have in our life, and that becomes in some ways a barrier between us and direct experience? So instead of directly experiencing, we have that judgment slash commentary.

Yeah, and that, of course, is the work of the self. Because notice—the self is permanent. The self is a product of the past. And it doesn't change. That's the nature of the self. So that's where we're trapped.

It's very true what you said about how the judgment is very much part of that habit and also part of the past. But would you say also that judgment—there is a sense of comparison as well, and that's also the opportunity of the self comparing something as better or worse and what we want?

Yes, that's the world of concept. Of course, that sense of comparison at its heart is what the Buddha calls *m āna*, which is a central movement of the self. *Māna* is usually translated as conceit, but literally it means "measure." It's an action noun from the root *mā*, to measure. If you think about it, when you measure something, you get out your ruler and you measure it. In doing so, what you've done is create a border where this thing that I'm measuring ends and the rest of the world begins. So there's a fundamental division: me here, you there. This is the fundamental act of self. And for the Buddha, fully awakening is the complete letting go of that moment.

Also, coming back to that question—the person was asking about not obsessing over labeling an experience, connecting that with judgment. The labeling or noting practice in the Mahasi tradition—is that a labeling or noting practice that is without judgment?

This causes great confusion. People think noting means labeling. I think it's because of this use of the English word "to note." But in Burmese, there's a verb that means "to aware." If you notice, in English we don't use awareness as a verb. We use it as a noun. We don't say "I aware." We say "I am aware." But noting essentially means "aware of." When the Mahasi Sayadaw's disciples were translating into English, they scratched their heads—these people don't have a verb for awareness.

We'll just use noting. And the labeling, the naming, can be very, very useful because it helps to aim the awareness precisely where you want it to go. When you're practicing for insight, precision in awareness is very important—much more important than if you're doing serenity meditation.

So remember, insight meditation is all about change. Well, if you're going to see change very clearly, you need to distinguish between this and that. This becomes that. This ends. That begins. So you need to be precise with the awareness, and the naming helps precision.

But it's basically an optional added extra. You don't need it. Some people find it extremely useful and use it a lot. Some people find it just gets in the way—it gets too conceptual and it's not useful for them. Some people find that sometimes it's useful, sometimes it isn't. So it's the optional added extra. But the essential thing, by noting, we mean directly aware of it, with or without the name. It doesn't matter. Directly aware of it.

Someone has asked a related question: how about "knowing" instead of "noting" as a verb? That would work, but "knowing" in English can have too conceptual an implication to it. I like "awaring" because there's no conceptual overlay. So I talk about awaring because it cuts through the concepts. You can know your way home, for example—well, that's pure conception. But knowing the feel of sitting on this chair, swaying backwards and forwards, that's not conceptual. It's direct.

How we use language in meditation practice is very important because language easily leads us astray, but equally it can be very helpful if we find the right term. And this is one of the challenges when we undertake meditation practices—to use language skillfully. The Buddha spent a lot of time refining his language to get it right. So if knowing is helpful, go for it. Otherwise, awaring.

Another question: "I've noticed people being sucked into pattern recognition to the point of near delusion and paranoia. I imagine anything taken to extreme is going to get you into trouble."

Pattern recognition is very much part of insight, but anything that takes you towards delusion and paranoia—obviously it's become obsessive and it's no longer wholesome. And meditation, you know, people can have bad effects from meditation, for sure. This is quite regular. And some people really should not be doing insight meditation. But usually they're the ones that do, which is one of the problems.

Anything that gets out of whack, anything that gets out of balance can be really bad. And this is why your own discernment is so important. When you undertake a meditation practice, particularly in the context of the Buddhist teaching, the Buddha really emphasizes independence and making your own judgments about what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. You have to develop that capacity to develop your own discernment. But it's really important when you undertake a meditation practice to recognize that I, as the practitioner, I'm the one in charge, not the teacher. The teacher is a guide, but I'm the one who's responsible because I'm the one who's doing it.

Another question: "What is your opinion on new age spiritualism that focuses on looking for and recognizing patterns to improve their lives?"

Depends what you mean by "improve," doesn't it? The problem with new age spiritualism, or spirituality, whatever you want to call it, is that it's very much the dharma of a consumer society—where I can take a bit of this, take a bit of that, mix it all together, and improve my productivity at work. That doesn't take us very far, in my view. That's just my own prejudice, of course. The dharma is something vast, something that we surrender to. You can't pick and choose. It doesn't work. You just take on the whole package or

not.

Someone has asked about rebirth—a topic that comes up in many of our talks and something people often grapple with. So let me share more about this, especially for those who really can't believe in it or understand it.

First of all, you don't have to believe in it. It's completely unnecessary. As for wrapping one's head around it, it is quite difficult to get a hold of—not simply because of cultural distinctions, like it not being part of our Western culture, but also because the Buddha's understanding of rebirth, of life after life, is based on his understanding of not-self, anattā.

This is the first thing people usually miss. They assume that when the Buddha talks about rebirth, he's talking about personal survival after death—post-mortem survival. He is not talking about personal survival. He's talking about not-self. The key is to understand that when the Buddha talks about rebirth, he's talking about it from the perspective of anattā. And if you don't get anattā, you're not going to understand what he's talking about in terms of rebirth. You're going to assume it's all about me. Do I get to live on after death or not? That's people's basic attitude. If someone feels that after they die they're still going to be here in some form or another, then they're interested. If someone thinks that when they die that's it, it's all over, they're not interested. And you'll notice that both these movements are all about me, all about the self. What is fundamental to understanding rebirth is that for the Buddha, it's part of not-self.

Karma has a great deal to do with this as well. You get the term kamma-vipāka. Kamma is action. Vipāka is ripening—how the action ripens. Now, the ripening process can be instantaneous, or it can take an immense period of time. So karma is clearly interrelated to rebirth.

For example, in contemporary secular Buddhism, where people begin by saying there's no rebirth—when you're dead, you're dead—those same people will also be highly skeptical about the reality of enlightenment. Some will simply say that enlightenment is psychologically impossible. Either they'll dismiss it completely, or they'll lower the standard dramatically, like certain internet gurus who say, "Look, if you're relatively balanced and economist, then you're enlightened."

Why do these two go together? Why does the rejection of rebirth on the one hand come paired with an inability to come to terms with the idea of enlightenment on the other? Because when you look at what the Buddha means by enlightenment, it's perfectly obvious you need a very long time for this project.

If you've got to do it in a human lifetime, you probably won't make it. You need much more time. And so it's a much more cosmic kind of approach to understanding how the world works, which is completely alien to the Western worldview. The Western world has always had a very narrow view of the universe. The Indian view of the universe is immense, wide open. And we have problems accommodating that.

Question: Is there any emphasis on letting go in vipassanā, or is it just about being aware of anicca, anattā, and dukkha?

You cannot be aware of anicca, dukkha, and anattā without letting go. If you're holding on, you'll never see the tilakkhaṇa.

Question: Are all paradoxes resolved when one stays in touch with ultimate reality?

Yes, eventually. And when I say eventually, I'm using conceptual words—I'm being conceptual. Because time is just a concept. But yes, that's right.

Closing Dedication

Merit is a poor translation of puñña, which essentially means auspicious power. May the power of what we've done tonight radiate throughout the universe—not restricted to any one person or any one group of people, but spreading around the town, spreading everywhere and everywhere.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.