Where Zen and Vipassanā Meet - Patrick Kearney

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:23:57

Hello, everyone. Welcome to SITHEADS Meditation Club. My name is John. I help organize this group. SITHEADS is a sitting and social group for people interested in deep meditation practice or even just curious about deep meditation practice. Everything we do is free and donation-based. If you want to hang out with us, you can find us at sit-heads.com.

Now, it is my pleasure to introduce Patrick Kearney. Patrick, is it okay if I talk about you a little bit in the third person while you sort of sit there and take it?

*Patrick:** You may. I'll just absorb into not-self and not be bothered.

*John:** Perfect. So Patrick Kearney is a meditation teacher. He has practiced the Satipatthana Vipassana style of mindfulness meditation, most frequently found in Burma, since 1977. His training is mostly in the tradition of the very famous Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw. He also spent several years as a Buddhist monk. His main teachers—I don't think he actually got to intersect with Mahasi himself—were Mahasi's very famous lineage holder Sayadaw U Pandita, as well as John Hale. He also trained in the Diamond Sangha lineage of Zen, where his teachers were Robert Aitken Roshi and Paul Maloney Roshi.

Patrick has been teaching full-time for over twenty years. He teaches both practical techniques as well as the underlying theory. To me, I have never met a dual Mahasi-style Vipassana Zen practitioner. That is a very fascinating juxtaposition. So I am very excited to get to talk to Patrick about it.

Patrick, I'm really happy that you're here with us. Before you and I have a conversation and then open it up to Q&A, is there anything that you want to say before we get started?

*Patrick:** No, I think you covered the essential points. I think we can get started.

*John:** Cool. So we'll just have a little chat, you and I, maybe thirty minutes, something like that—maybe a little longer if I can't restrain myself—and then we will open it up to Q&A from the group.

The place where I want to start is exactly where I said. Mahasi Vipassana, for anyone who doesn't know—people may be familiar with it as noting, which I think is a slightly reductive way of referring to it. But I think that's what people are familiar with: "Oh, noting practice." We could talk about the ways in which it's more than noting; that would be interesting. But first, I just want to ask: Mahasi-style Vipassana from Burma, Zen practice from Japan originally—what? How'd that happen?

*Patrick:** Well, it happened organically, as it were by accident. I got involved in Zen in the late seventies in Sydney, when I was looking for people to meditate with. There was very, very little happening.

*John:** Did you already know how to meditate? Had you learned somewhere?

*Patrick:** I'd begun earlier in the year. I left Australia to go to Sri Lanka and India because there was nothing—this is in the early seventies, early-mid seventies. I was reading about Buddhism, reading about meditation, and decided I've got to do this. But there was nothing happening in Australia. So I went to Sri Lanka and India. I did a retreat in Sri Lanka, two weeks at Kanduboda Meditation Center. That was my first jump in. It was quite horrific.

*John:** What was the lineage and what was the style of practice?

*Patrick:** Well, theoretically, it was Mahasi.

But in fact, as I realized later on, the monk who was in charge of the center at that time was not only not Mahasi, but actually anti-Mahasi. So what I was actually practicing was essentially serenity with ānāpānasati, awareness at the nose tip. But I didn't know enough about what was going on to realize that was what was happening.

I did talk with them about the problems I was having with focusing at the nose tip because I was getting a lot of head tension and so on. I suggested that I bring the awareness down below to the rising and falling of the abdomen because I had read about this technique. And the teacher was horrified. "Oh no," he said, "you can't do that. You cannot focus on your bowels. Your bowels are dirty. You focus here." At this very clean part, apparently.

That was when I realized there was something odd going on. But anyway, I stayed there two weeks, and my body was in terrible shape. My knees hurt for two weeks afterwards. I had to sit leaning against a wall. That's when I realized I needed to do yoga, chiropractic, massage—just to physically be able to do this practice. I went off to India, got sick, got hepatitis, came back and decided I had to be better prepared next time.

So I was looking in Sydney for someone to meditate with. I just came across an announcement about a visiting Tibetan Lama who was giving a talk. I went to the talk, put my name down for the mailing list. He ran a weekend retreat. At that weekend retreat, I was sitting hunched over on this terrible cushion, and I looked to my right and there on the floor was this magnificent black cushion. I looked at that cushion and thought, "I've got to get a cushion like that." Then my eyes went upwards to the fellow sitting on it—full lotus, perfectly straight back, perfect mudrā. I thought, "I've got to get a posture like that." That was Lee Davison, who was one of the founders of Zen in Australia.

So I joined what was then Sydney Zen Group, but what is now the Sydney Zen Center. I was one of the very early members, just by coincidence. But I liked it because they had good cushions, they taught you

how to sit with proper posture, and they only sat for 25 minutes at a stretch. I could handle that. What else could you want? And they told me to keep my eyes open, which I found excellent advice because that way I didn't fall asleep.

I've never made it to full lotus, except for a few moments at a time, but I do sit comfortably now. It's interesting the number of long-term meditators who have injured their kneecaps. Because the problem is not the knees—the problem is the hips. If you don't have the hip flexibility, all the stress goes to the kneecap. And if you're raised sitting on furniture, you don't have the hip flexibility. It's very, very unusual to have it naturally.

So I found my way to Zen. We ran the first Zen retreat in Australia. At the time, we were writing to every Zen teacher we had heard of saying, "Why don't you come to Australia?" Basically, they never even bothered to answer. Then finally, we wrote to Robert Aitken Roshi in Hawaii and said, "Why don't you come to Australia?" And he answered. It was fantastic. I remember the meeting, all of us sitting around saying, "We've got a letter from a Zen teacher!"

Unbelievable. Anyway, in the letter, he said no. But he suggested we ask his teacher, Yamada Roshi. So we wrote to him in Japan, and he wrote back saying no, why don't you ask Aiken Roshi? So they were just bouncing us back and forth.

At that point, we got fed up and simply organized our own retreat. When Aiken Roshi found out about this, he was horrified and said, "I'm coming." You call this love—that's what brought him there. So we established this connection with the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii.

When I had the money to once more head off on pilgrimage, I started in Hawaii. I went there originally to stay three months, but I ended up staying two years. If any of you have spent time in Hawaii, you would understand exactly why. It's a very difficult place to leave. In fact, when I left, my motive was: if I don't leave now, I'll never leave.

So then I went back to Southeast Asia and South Asia. This was 1982, and the Burmese government had shut down the foreign meditation program. You could only get a one-week tourist visa to Burma—that was it. So I headed off to Sri Lanka and India again and only made it to Burma in 1984 on the one-week visa.

In Calcutta, I met someone who was coming from the other direction, having just been in Burma. I asked him what was happening at Mahasi Center, and he said there was a new teacher working with foreigners. His name was Sayadaw U Pandita. When I asked what he was like, he shook his head and said, "I never realized just how sloppy my meditation was until I worked with U Pandita."

I thought, I've got to go there. The perfect, straight-as-a-pin, lotus posture—I had to go find this guy. I sense a pattern emerging: drawn to love, but also to rigor.

So I went there and spent a week with him. He was very busy running the center and had only one hour a

day to teach foreigners. And there was one foreigner—that was me. So I had an hour a day with him, interviewing directly with U Pandita himself.

He had just taken over the job of teaching foreigners. Later, when he became popular and lots of people came, he stepped back and had other teachers do the interviews. But in those early years, he was doing them himself. I think partly for his own education—to find out what was going on with these Westerners, who we were. We're much more difficult to teach than the Burmese.

This was still at Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha. It was only afterward that he left and set up his own center.

At the end of my week, I went to say goodbye, and he said, "You should go to the office and apply for a long-term meditation visa."

I said, "But Sayadaw, there are no long-term meditation visas. You can only get a tourist visa."

And he replied, "You should go to the office and apply for a long-term meditation visa."

And I said, "Yes, Sayadaw."

So I went off there, and the government had just opened up. I applied, got the sponsorship, went to Bangkok, applied for the visa, and eventually got it and came back for three months with him. I was the first one back after that closure period.

About twenty-four hours after I arrived, another foreigner turned up—an English guy called John Hale, whom I had met briefly in India previously. I realized there was something special about him because we went off to our first meeting with Sayadaw U Pandita, sitting in the room that I had been in before. I was looking around thinking, "This is nice to come back again," and I glanced at John. He was already in deep samādhi. I thought, "Oh, this guy's pretty good." And he was—he was phenomenal. So really that three-month retreat, I had two teachers: Sayadaw U Pandita and John. We became friends, and he eventually became my main teacher. That was the Mahasi connection.

Meanwhile, when I came back to Australia, one of my old Zen friends said, "Well, now you can come back to Zen." I said, "No, no, no, I'm really not interested." But foolishly, I added, "I would like to actually figure out the Mu koan, because I'd been working on Zhaozhou's Mu and I'd never got it."

For anyone who doesn't know, a koan is essentially a story—it can be very brief or much longer—that encapsulates a dharma understanding which cannot be conveyed conceptually. You either get it or you don't. One of the classical opening koans is Zhaozhou's Mu. The story goes: A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" Zhaozhou said, "Mu." Mu, apparently, in medieval Chinese and in modern Japanese, is the negative—"no" or "not." I never fully understand why they don't just call it the No Koan if that's what it actually means. My personal hypothesis is it's not as mysterious and mystical if you say "no." It's much more impressive if you say "mu."

But there's something I'm struck by here. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, what was it like to be a curious and sincere meditator pursuing Buddhist practice? It's so different now. People watching this can just go onto their computer, type "meditation," and have access to all these teachers, all these teachings, all the different styles of practice. It's an embarrassment of riches now. But back then, if you wanted to learn about meditation, you went to India, you went to Sri Lanka. When you came back to Australia, you got into Zen because that's what was around—there wasn't a full menu, a smorgasbord of everything the way there is now.

It was such an adventure then. It was hard. You had to really work, you had to travel, you had to spend money, you had to spend time, you had to endure hardships to obtain the Dharma. In some ways that was difficult, but in other ways, what an adventure. There was a feeling of having earned it, having had to climb the proverbial mountain to meet the master on top instead of just putting it into your Google search bar. There's also a camaraderie among the people who were fellow travelers from that generation. It sounds like John Hale and I had an experience of being bound together by that shared odyssey. I know that Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield and Mirabai Bush and all these people had that feeling among them.

Is that true? Am I looking at things through rose-tinted lenses, a nostalgia for a past I didn't get to experience? Or was it really like that? And how does it feel to look out over the landscape as it is today, where things are so different in terms of how one accesses Dharma?

I think if you look at the current situation from my perspective, Dharma is much more widely spread—inconceivably so compared to my youth. When I started meditating, to actually be interested in doing Buddhist meditation, much less to actually pursue it and do it, you had to be certifiably insane. It was a completely crazy thing to do. Now it's all over the place in the guise of mindfulness. It's become part of the culture.

Yes. So the Dharma culture these days is very, very wide, but it's very shallow. Back in the day, it was very narrow, but it went very deep. Spread thin in a way. But I think this is inevitable. I think this is just part of the way the Dharma spreads into a new culture. And it'll deepen over time because there's always some people who want to go, who need, who have to go deep, and they'll find a way regardless of the circumstances. They're the point of the spear. They're the ones who push it forward.

But one thing that is different is economically, it's much harder these days. When I saved money in Australia to go to Asia, well, back when I arrived in Hawaii in 1980, one Australian dollar was worth, I think, a dollar twenty American. It's now about maybe seventy cents American. Plus there was full employment. So you could walk away from a job and disappear for a year, two years, five years, and come back feeling confident you could just walk into another job.

That's incredible. But young people today, it's like they feel if they don't grab that next rung on the ladder right now, they're done, they're finished.

Yeah. You didn't have that sense of insecurity. Capitalism was not as developed and as ruthless then as it is now. So it was economically and socially a lot easier for people to do this. Now you've got to have, I think, double, triple the dedication to do that. Because when you walk away, you've got absolutely no idea whether you'll ever be able to get back in again.

That door might close behind you.

You know, there was always a problem, but back in the day it was nothing like as bad as it is today. I think this is one of the reasons that when Sharon and Joseph and Jack came back, the thing they started was a retreat center because that was the paradigm they understood. And it was an accessible paradigm—the idea that if someone's really serious about practice here in the West, they'll find a way to do a three month retreat every year or something like that. And that was kind of viable.

It sounds like in a way that it isn't so much now. And that's why I feel like there's a need for a different kind of institution, an institution that doesn't require you to fully uproot yourself from your life in a way that isn't as doable as it was maybe in the seventies—and still find your way to deep practice somehow.

But it is interesting how that paradigm, the IMS paradigm, really still is the way it's set up. What it's set up to support is sporadic, long retreats. And that's necessary if you want to go deep—you've got to spend the time to go deep. And depending on how disturbed the mind is, the contemporary Western mind is a lot more disturbed than, say, the Burmese mind of the 1980s. And it takes us a lot longer just to settle.

Yeah.

And also, we're burdened by the fact that we don't have saddha. We don't have faith.

Oh, true. Yeah. You said saddha, the spiritual faculty?

Yeah.

It's amazing how our sort of rationalistic skepticism is so useful in so many things and such an incredible obstruction during meditation practice. And I remember when I first started doing Vipassana practice, Mahasi style practice, and I learned about the five controlling faculties, the five spiritual faculties that you use in Vipassana practice—one of them being saddha or faith. That one, I sort of poo-pooed. I didn't say anything to my teacher, but I was like, okay, well, that one I don't care about. I'll focus on the other ones. That's some vestigial thing left in from a more benighted era.

And I was so crazily wrong. Once I was able to understand that faculty as something akin to trust, rather than as I had grown up understanding faith—meaning sort of blind faith in something that you have no evidence for—once I understood it to mean a sort of trust that is engendered by experience, I was able to connect with that faculty a bit more and see its essentiality, really.

In the West, we're hampered by our cultural conditioning, which sees faith as essentially belief, but in

particular belief in things that normal, rational people would not believe in.

And on the other side is science, and science is all about rationality and empiricism, what actually works, and they're at war with each other. But this is a European cultural war. It's got nothing to do with India. It's got nothing to do with Buddha. But we drag him into it.

Saddha—there's no real adequate translation for it. It comes from the Sanskrit word *shrad*, heart, and the root *da*, to place. So *saddha* in Pali means to place the heart, as in to put one's heart into something, or to place in the heart, to take something to heart. *Saddha* is all about the heart relationship to what's going on.

It's rather like love. Let's say you fall in love with someone and then you decide, I want to spend the rest of my life with this person. If a friend says, "Look, you are being utterly irrational. What is your evidence that this is going to work out over the next 30 years? What data do you have that could possibly justify this decision?" The answer is, of course, there isn't any. But I just know. And I'm going to take the jump because I have to. That's *saddha*. It's not belief. It's the heart's movement, the heart's determination to take the chance.

*Michael:** That's beautifully put. Maybe we could use that as a segue into talking about meditation itself. I'd be curious to hear—if you were to describe Mahasi style practice... I feel like Mahasi practice is maybe not always so clearly understood. There are so many different people talking about it in different ways. It's been filtered through the lenses of various teachers, both older and more contemporary, Asian and Western. If you were to just describe it to someone who's never heard of it—what is Mahasi practice? What's it for? Why do I do it? And how do I do it?

*Stephen:** The practice essentially is to directly aware whatever is happening now. That's the practice.

*Michael:** I would perhaps respond back, "Yeah, I hear a lot of meditation described that way. Be here now, experience what's happening without judgment." But that doesn't give me that much purchase into what is distinct about this style of practice.

*Stephen:** And that's what I like. That's what I liked about the Mahasi approach, particularly when I came across it through Sayadaw U Pandita. The reason why I left Zen and went back to Asia—when I told Robert Aitken Roshi, he was horrified that I was descending into the Hinayana. And I told him, "I need to go because I want to learn how to meditate."

Now, some people are natural and intuitive meditators. They just get it and they just do it. In Diamond Sangha Zen, which is the lineage I trained in, they didn't really teach how to meditate. It was very basic. Just, you know, here's your meditation object, hang on to it. That was the instruction. But they didn't teach the craft.

*Michael:** Yeah.

*Stephen:** But I needed to learn the craft. Exactly how do I do it? When this happens, what do I do then?

When that happens, what then? And what U Pandita taught was the craft.

*Michael:** Yeah.

*Stephen:** And so you build the craft. How do I directly aware? What is it that I'm directly aware of? How do I know that I'm directly aware of it? And why should I directly aware it? And what happens when it changes?

What happens when it doesn't change? What happens when I'm distracted? And so on.

What Mahasi does, when it's taught properly, is develop the craft so that people literally know what they're doing. These days I have a number of quite senior practitioners who come to my retreats because they want to learn the craft—because they've never actually learned it.

But there are different crafts. If you learned your craft from S.N. Goenka, your style of experiencing what's happening in the present moment would look quite different from if you'd learned it from Sayadaw U Pandita. And if you managed to glean some insight into what Zen sitting or shikantaza—just sitting—actually is, and you managed to learn how to do that, that craft is very different as well. It's not like the people who managed to penetrate the heart of shikantaza are now doing something quite similar to Mahasi practice. It's a different practice.

So as soon as you go into the whole question of method and technique, things start to separate. In the most general sense, if you've got a room full of people who are starting to learn how to meditate, roughly speaking you could say: what you should do is take X as your meditation object—let's call it the breathing. We could be even more specific: the breathing sensed at the nose tip, or the breathing sensed in the abdomen. Stay with that. Hang on to it. Don't let go. And when you're distracted, we'll talk about what happens then. That's one possibility.

Another possibility is: just sit there and let your awareness roam and simply notice your awareness. You're always aware. Right now, you are aware. Start to notice the awareness itself. It doesn't matter what you're aware of.

So you've got two ends of a spectrum here. One is where you give yourself something very specific to be aware of, and that's your central point of interest. At the other end, you don't care what you're aware of—you're just interested in the awareness itself.

Now, you try that with a room full of people. You'll find some people, if you say "just be aware of the awareness itself," they're completely lost. They've got no idea what you're talking about. They're all over the shop. Whereas you give them a specific something to be aware of—oh, at least I know what to do. And they can get started.

But other people, you give them that one thing to be aware of and they feel cramped, claustrophobic, tight. They work themselves up. It doesn't work. You say, "No, no, just relax and open up and be aware," and

suddenly: now I'm present. Now it's really working for me.

In other words, people are different. No technique works for everyone. There is no such thing as the one true technique. And this is really, really important, especially for people who are coming into meditation. There is no one true technique which works for everyone. It's up to the meditator to discover which method works for me. It's not up to the teacher. The teacher knows what the teacher has been trained in and what the teacher is skillful at. It's up to the meditator to say, "No, this doesn't work for me. I've got to try something else."

But that's a relatively recent luxury. If you were born in 1928 in Burma, you're probably going to be doing Mahasi practice—or actually, there are more options than that in Burma. You could do Mogok, Sunlun, Pa Auk. There's a lot. So bad example, forget it. There are thousands of insight meditation techniques alone. But it's going to be one of the Burmese styles.

Because you're in Burma and it's 1933 or whatever. And so you better hope one of those Burmese styles lines up well with you. And if you're in the USA, then you're stuck with the American methods. What to do? What are those?

We're all captured by our historical circumstances. We have a particular inheritance—karmic inheritance, genetic inheritance. We're living in a certain time, a certain place. We have certain cultural conditioning. And all of this influences our approach to meditation, what we think meditation is, what we're looking for, how we can do it, how we're prepared to learn it, what teachers are available to teach us. Everything is conditioned.

But all I was saying is that this idea of "if this technique doesn't work for you, try another, find the one that works for you"—it's only relatively recent that you would have access to more than a few options in terms of technique. It's actually quite a blessing that you can explore. And that's the big advantage of the current situation, as I said—very wide. Now, shallow perhaps, but what to do? It's the person who brings the depth into it. You've got lots of options to explore and lots of choices, and so you've got the potential to find something that actually works for you. And then, of course, once you find it, you go for it. You can't afford to muck around.

Question from the audience: Would you say that despite your long-time involvement with Zen, when it comes to your technique or your craft, you are primarily a sort of Mahasi practitioner? That's your main approach? Are you doing Zen-style shikantaza, or would you say your technique is mostly influenced by the Burmese practice?

The deeper you go in any technique, the more you actually—to some degree—master it, the more the practice itself turns into play. And when you meet someone else who's playing, you can recognize the similarities. So a lot of these differences, they're very, very important when you begin, but they're not so important later on. So shikantaza and Mahasi style—I think they come together. Fundamentally, they turn

out to be the same thing. But you've got to get there.

How do you get there? You've got to go along a certain path. So the different techniques or the different lineages provide different paths. And the different paths suit particular kinds of people. And if they work, they will get you there. But once you're there, you can look around and realize, "Oh yeah, that's similar. I can see where they're coming from. I can see why they're doing that."

Questioner continues: So that's super interesting to me, because I've talked with people who have different views on this matter. Some people feel that no, these practices are different, and they don't necessarily go to the same place. They have things in common—you'll recognize things in the other practices, you'll see the similarities—but they're taking you to different places, different awakenings, different samadhis. And then there are other folks I've spoken to, and whose work I've read, who have this great conviction that essentially they're all paths to the same mountaintop. Once you get to the top of the mountain, you'll notice that all those other paths actually get to the very same place. It sounds like you definitely feel these are all pathways up the same mountain, and it's just a question of where you're starting, on what side of the mountain, and what method of climbing best suits you. Am I characterizing you fairly?

Because what we're dealing with is Dharma. A dharma is simply what is happening, what is real. That's it. So of course there's similarity, because we're all dealing with the same samsara and it's all the same Dharma.

There are differences in concept. There are conceptual differences, and these can be very great. So for example, I'm climbing up the mountain—well, what is the top of the mountain? It's enlightenment. So what is enlightenment exactly? Well, if you go to classical Theravada and go back to the Buddha himself, it's quite simple. Full enlightenment is the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion.

But you talk to a lot of people in secular Buddhism, you talk to some people in Mahayana Buddhism, and they say, "No, no, no, no. That's ridiculous. That's psychologically impossible. It doesn't exist." So they will define enlightenment in some other way. I was reading a book—I forget who wrote it, a very good American practitioner, an academic. I forget his name. I'm too old; I can't remember names anymore. I was never very good at it anyway. But he wrote a book on enlightenment.

I think it might have even been titled *What Is Enlightenment?* with a question mark. I was very interested, so I read the book, and really it should have been named *What Is Enlightenment in Zen?* because he's coming out of a Zen background. Much of it was about the problem that arises when a respected Zen teacher goes off the rails and becomes enmeshed in scandal. How does one reconcile their enlightenment with their scandal? How do you bring that together?

There was much learned discussion about this. And I'm reading this thinking, "It's pretty obvious. If he got into these scandals, mate, he wasn't enlightened." He might have been very charismatic. He might have been a great leader. He might have been very dedicated. But he's obviously not enlightened because

otherwise he wouldn't have gotten involved in these scandals. That's pretty simple.

So you notice the conceptual framework is very different. In one view, if you're involved in these kinds of scandals, you are not enlightened—simple. Versus another view where you can be enlightened but somehow still get immersed in all these different kinds of scandals. Now this is purely conceptual, and in the world of concept, you can have these divisions and they never go away, because that's the nature of concept.

This is one of the difficulties—whenever we talk about Dharma, we're in the world of concept. It's only in direct experience that we have the purity of the Dharma itself. And in that direct experience, concept doesn't matter. It's just what's going on.

You could say something similar with technique—that essentially the technique is just a way of getting you to the truth, just a way of getting you to the Dharma. The differences between techniques will essentially be discarded along with the techniques at a certain point. I like to say that meditation is something we do while we're waiting for something else to happen. It keeps us busy.

Well, I've monopolized your time long enough. Why don't we open it up to questions?

One practitioner shared: "I've done three sixty-day retreats at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's center, and I interact mostly with Common Ground these days. There's a lot of focusing on mindfulness of breathing via Analayo, who is rather critical of Mahasi in a talk I heard. I'm trying to figure out whether I want to keep myself in one place or if it's okay to move around between the two."

I think overall you should feel free to move around. Once you've established your practice—and it sounds like you have, you're an experienced practitioner—you get a sense of what works for you and then pursue that. It can always be very useful to explore, try something alternative, try something different, see if it works, see if it doesn't.

The more experience you have as a practitioner, the more discernment you develop about whether something works for you. In the popular presentation of mindfulness, for example, they really emphasize nonjudgmental awareness. You can see why they say nonjudgmental—because if you start to meditate and get caught up in conceptual ideas about what should be, what shouldn't be, what's supposed to happen, you get lost. But as you gain more experience, your discernment, your wisdom faculty develops, and you begin to sense what really works for you and what doesn't. You learn to trust that understanding.

Remember that for the Buddha, the direction of the practice is toward increasing independence. You treat your teachers with respect, but in the relationship between teacher and student, the one in charge is the student. You take on what is useful and simply drop what is not. You can see for yourself over time what works and what doesn't.

And the basic standard is this: is greed, hatred, and delusion going down, or is it going up? If it's going

down, it's working. And so you just trust that. You trust your own judgment, your own decision-making.

Analayo's criticisms of Mahasi are very interesting because they show his character as an intellectual. And when you're an intellectual—and he's very, very intelligent, really, really good at it—then conceptual frameworks are very important to you. Now, one of the things about concepts is they have very clear borders. You can distinguish between this and that with great accuracy and precision, which is what Analayo and all good scholars do, especially scholars of Buddhism. That's great because you get a view, a picture of what's going on, which can be extremely useful for the practitioner.

But the question is: in my experience, is this working? So I might be doing a practice about which this great authority says, "You shouldn't do this practice because it's no good for you." But I'm doing it and it's working for me. So who do I believe—my experience or that theory? Well, if I'm a practitioner, there's no debate. My experience. It's an interesting theory, and maybe I'll keep an eye out. Maybe what he's saying is correct. But if this is working for me, I'm going for it, thank you very much.

Let's see—Bijan, would you like to come up and ask your question?

"Hi Patrick, thanks for doing this. My question is about when did the practice feel like it became real for you? Was it sort of gradual? Did it feel like the switch from Zen to the Mahasi style—did meditation feel real for you in both of those? Or was it more like once you switched to Mahasi, there was an experience or a time on retreat where you thought, 'Okay, this is what I'm going to be doing'? I guess it comes back to the faith thing. When did the faith in the practice really solidify for you?"

I was pretty solid before I encountered Mahasi. I actually started with a very early book on the Mahasi method—Nyanaponika Thera's book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. I read that when I was a university student in the early seventies. I didn't understand what I was reading, but as I was reading it, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind: I have to do this. I really have to do this. So that was, in a sense, the beginning.

In my Zen days, I really liked Zen. I liked the way the retreats were structured because everything was completely choreographed. You were caught up, under total control. There was nowhere to back out to, which is great for lazy, resistant people like me. You were taken through this process. And I would reflect afterwards: what is it that brings me back to these things? Because it's so hard. And I realized that it's when I'm doing intensive meditation that I feel real. Things might be quite painful, but they're real. When I'm not meditating, it's like there's a layer of stuff that gets in the way, and it's not real, not authentic anymore. So I've always had that relationship with meditation.

What Mahasi gave me again was essentially the method. And the key point was when I discovered that if you're distracted, your distraction becomes your meditation object. That was a revelation.

If you think about how, over the long term, what direction do I travel in my meditation practice—what determines the direction I'm going in—I would say there are two things. One is what I'm interested in. If

I'm doing a meditation practice that's just as boring as batshit, I'm likely to drop it. But if I find a meditation practice I find interesting, I'll keep going with it. So that's one factor, one vector. And the other one is what gets in the way.

What prevents me from meditating? Why is it that I cannot keep my mind on my meditation object for more than 5.2 nanoseconds? This becomes interesting because that's what I've got to work on. That is my meditation object. And it's a really important meditation object.

Of course, sometimes what you find interesting and what gets in the way are actually the same thing. In my case, I'm fascinated by distraction. I'm fascinated by the fact that my mind will not stay still. Why not? What's it doing? How is it doing it? What's happening when it moves like this? It's endlessly fascinating.

This gives me a deep sense of satisfaction because it's real. It's not artificial. I'm not pretending. Decades ago, in my misspent youth, I did some acting lessons based on Stanislavski's method. They drew the distinction between acting and *acting*. When you act, it's real and the audience can see it. When you're acting, there's a layer of "I'm pretending to do this" and it's not real—and the audience picks it up immediately. So the best actors are the ones you look at on the screen and think, "This person's not acting," but they're actually the best.

It's that sense of authenticity that I find in the actual meditation encounter. And when I can feel that, I know I'm doing the right thing.

One way that Mahasi Sayadaw sums up the practice is: you're directly aware of whatever is predominant right now. If I'm caught up in anger, anger is predominant. Anger becomes my meditation object.

Now it's nice, it's easy to say, but that's when the craft comes in. How do I do that? If I'm working with emotion—and this is true of any emotion, but let's take the emotion of anger—first of all, never believe the story. Mind, you cannot be angry unless you've got a story going on in the mind in which someone did something they should not have done. In other words, you've got a complex story with a set of values built into it, and that set of values is being violated. This is the realm of concept. Do not go there. Drop it. Come back to the body. Bring the awareness into the body.

When you're actually doing the meditation practice, use the working assumption: every thought that I think is a lie—including the thought that every thought that I think is a lie. That too is a lie. Do not believe any of them.

So what to do? Drop the awareness into the body and then feel: how does the anger present in the body? Non-conceptually, sensation. Go to the elemental qualities of the sensation. Firstly, where in the body do you feel anger? Now, if there's anger, there's tension in the body. You cannot be angry if the body is completely relaxed. So there's tension. Where is it? You focus in on that. What's the quality of that

sensation? Is it hard? Is it soft? Is it hot? Is it cold?

For me, for example, generally with anger, I find anger to be hard, rough, sharp, energetic.

There's a lot of movement in there, and it can be surging throughout the whole body.

What's the feeling tone of it? Is it pleasant, or is it painful? I find anger is sometimes pleasant, when it gives me a sense of power—like "when I meet that person, I'm going to smash them." But it can be excruciatingly painful when it's associated with powerlessness. Impotent rage is particularly acutely painful.

So what's the feeling quality of it? Is it hot or is it cold? Usually I find anger to be hot, but sometimes it's cold. And I think the cold variety is the most dangerous, I suspect.

So you're going into the body, the physical sensation and the feeling component, checking the elemental quality of the experience. You might even ask yourself the question: putting aside the story, how do I know that I'm angry? What's the experience? What does it feel like? Oh, it feels like this. And then you allow yourself to feel that.

Now, when you do this, if you've got a lot of energy, if the emotion is really strong, you're not going to be very good at maintaining a nice meditation posture. So forget about it. Just do what the body wants to do. The body wants to go charging off down the street? Let the body go charging off down the street, but feel it.

And again, you'll get sucked into the story again and again. "This is what it's about." As soon as you recognize that, drop it, come back into the body. You're not interested in what it's about. You're interested in the direct experience of it. So you go right into the center of it, but without the concept, and let it burn itself out—which it will. And then you see the impermanence of it.

You'll notice that the more time you spend in the story, the more you feed the emotion and the longer you extend it. But the more time you can spend inside the sentient body, the faster it'll burn out because you're not feeding it. And when you see it disappear, that really weakens your attachment to it. Because you can see: oh, it's not permanent. It's not me.

Working with emotion is very, very interesting. But the foundation for it is working with the body, because that's where you find emotion. Emotion comes out of the body, the sentient body, the feeling body. So that's where you focus. You never believe the story. It is a lie. And for most people, that's the most difficult part, because we invest all our reality into our stories. That's our habit. And to break that habit is a really important part of the meditation practice, especially insight meditation.

A student asked: What would your guidance be for a lay person who wanted to develop equanimity in the

way the Buddha talks about it, and eventually experience nibbāna? What would your guidance be for that aspiration?

In the insight approach, broadly speaking, the emphasis is on mindfulness—where mindfulness is the felt continuity of awareness. So what you want is an approach to meditation which emphasizes maintaining awareness continuously over time. That's the basic discipline.

That's the boot camp training. And basically the idea is that if you maintain awareness continuously over time, the more successful you are at that, first of all, the concentration will naturally follow and equanimity will naturally follow. When the mind is dominated by mindfulness, it's dominated by equanimity. They go together.

So you cannot make yourself equanimous. You can't force it. It's like you either got it or you don't got it. But what you can do is, by cultivating the continuity of awareness, you can develop the equanimity.

Now, you notice that if your awareness is going to be continuous, that means your meditation method, whatever it is, has got to embrace what we normally call distraction. This is one of the characteristics of mindfulness meditation practice—it's not object-specific.

Let's say you're doing breathing meditation for thirty minutes. You sit down and you track your breathing. Now, out of those thirty minutes, how many minutes would you actually be on the breathing? Five, ten, fifteen, twenty on a good day. That means you're actually not spending thirty minutes doing the meditation—you're spending five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen, whatever. Because when you're not on the breathing, you're not doing the meditation.

But if you're doing a straight mindfulness meditation, you use as your meditation object whatever is happening. So as soon as you realize, "Oh, I'm distracted," that experience becomes your meditation object. Mindfulness meditation is not restricted to any particular object. When we talk about the craft of the practice, often what we're talking about is: How do I recognize that my mind has wandered, and then how do I make that the meditation object? Like, for example, if anger comes up. And the more you can do that, the more the awareness becomes continuous. Then the more equanimity will naturally emerge—just cause and effect.

When you're working with Dharma, you are working with nature. It's not that if you're a good boy, Buddha will reward you. It's simply that if you create certain conditions, certain effects will arise. If you maintain continuity of awareness, equanimity will arise. It will just happen.

And this is just to add something when we talked about the problem with thinking—we lose our awareness when we start to think. Have you ever had the experience where you're meditating and the mind slides off into thinking, but you don't notice that it slid off? Then suddenly you realize, "Oh, I'm thinking." And you realize you've been thinking for the past five minutes and didn't even know. The problem is not the thinking. The problem is losing the awareness of the thinking.

So this is where it gets really interesting and really tricky: How can I maintain continuity of awareness no matter what I'm doing, including thinking? That's really tricky, and it's very interesting. It opens up a whole new world.

A follow-up question was asked: Would a lay person have any hope of gathering that kind of momentum of awareness throughout their daily life? Is retreat time required to get to this point of equanimity?

You have to be extraordinarily talented not to need retreat time. But it is possible. The best meditators I've known over the decades have been lay people. And the most enlightened person I've ever known was a lay person.

It's definitely available, but you do have to commit yourself to it. It's a serious training. It's like anything else—if you want to be a good quality musician, you've got to put the time in. If you want to be a good quality athlete, you've got to put the time in. If you want to be a good quality meditator, you've got to put the time in.

And it's got to be quality time. You've got to approach the whole project with intelligence. It's not just hours spent sitting on a cushion. But it is available if you do it, because it's just natural processes, natural training. You train, you train well, you'll get the result.

Basically, it's the part of insight meditation practice where the practice can actually become kind of unpleasant. Am I characterizing that fairly? And do you want to answer the question, which again is: if continuity of awareness brings about equanimity, how do the dukkha ñāṇas arise?

Yes, I think that's a fair summary.

So a couple of questions have been sent to me to ask on behalf of the asker. First: one of the stories is the story of the self. Could you please comment on daily living with awareness of the lie of that story?

That's an interesting one. For the Buddha, self is a construction project that's never quite finished. When you get to know your distractions in the meditation practice, you can see that often what the distraction consists of is the creation of a self in this situation.

There are different ways in which you could become sensitive to it. One way would be, in any given situation, to drop in the question: do I think this is mine? So an emotion comes up—is this mine? Because if I think it's mine, that's self. Self appropriates and takes as its own.

Self and clinging—or attachment—in the Buddhist teaching always go together. So if you know anything at all about the Buddhist teaching, you know that clinging and attachment are very bad things indeed, and you should stop right now. Now the question is: what is meant by that? Because obviously the Buddha never said that—he didn't speak English.

The term he uses is *upādāna*. *Upādāna* comes from *dāna*, gift-giving. Then you have the prefix *ā*—long

A—and that changes the direction. If you give, the direction is out there. *Ādāna* is bringing in here, taking. *Upa* denotes intimacy. So *upādāna* is appropriation, intimate appropriation. I'm taking this as mine. And because it's mine, it's me. And because it's mine, it's really, really important.

So for example, I'm sure that all of you have dukkha. But I'm here to tell you that your dukkha is not as important as my dukkha. What makes it important? It's mine.

So tuning into this relationship can be very interesting. And it might be just as simple as when you get caught up in something, just dropping the question: is this mine? Question mark. Don't do anything with it, but just let that be there.

What the Buddha would say is actually it isn't. It's just natural phenomenon coming and going according to conditions. But if I relate to it as mine, it becomes very, very important indeed. And this is where I'm likely to screw things up.

The second question I was asked: if continuity of awareness brings about equanimity, how do the dukkha ñāṇas arise? For anyone who isn't familiar with that term, the dukkha ñāṇas refers to certain stages in the fairly well-defined, mapped-out stages of insight meditation that one typically goes through—particular stages associated with difficult experience. They're sometimes referred to as the contemplations or the knowledges of suffering, which I think is what dukkha ñāṇa literally means: knowledge of suffering. Basically, it's the part of insight meditation practice where the practice can actually become kind of unpleasant.

Basically, this takes us into the territory of insight, which for the Buddha means insight into the three universal characteristics of anicca, dukkha, anatta—notice always listed in that order. Anicca: change, impermanence. Dukkha: pain, suffering. Anatta: not-self.

They're listed in that order because they proceed from gross to subtle, from most obvious to least obvious. If you think about any kind of meditation technique designed to stimulate insight, what it will do is try to get you to notice change, to see the fact of change.

The way Mahasi does it is by bringing your attention to the fact of distraction. I'm meditating, then I'm distracted. I realize I'm distracted, I come back to meditating. In other words: meditating—change. I see I'm distracted—change. Back to meditation—change. Change, change, change, change, change. Any practice designed to generate insight is all about exposing change.

Now, according to the theory—and I think it actually works in practice—if you take something like the word anicca, usually translated as "impermanence," it sounds very abstract and rather unthreatening. But when you look at the word itself, it's *a-nicca*, which is the negative of *nicca*. In Sanskrit, *nitya*. *Nicca* in Pali, *nitya* in Sanskrit—they mean permanent in the sense of lasting unchanged over time. And therefore, they also mean reliable. If something doesn't change, it is reliable. I can depend upon it. In English you might have, for example, a perpetual endowment—a reliable endowment. You can relax now; it's all taken care

of.

But what the Buddha is saying is: every time you're aware of something, it becomes clearer and clearer that it is *anicca*—not *nicca*. Not permanent, not unchanging. Unreliable. Sooner or later it does disappoint. This is built in. It is a feature, not a bug. When this becomes clear, that's when you enter into the dukkha jnanas.

When the awareness is continuous enough to really see change, then at some point deep within, the citta—the heart—realizes: wait a minute, if everything that I'm aware of changes, that means there's nothing to hold on to. That's the essence of dukkha. And then that segues into not-self.

Equanimity emerges and gradually develops throughout this process, but it really matures when not-self is the predominant perception. Dukkha is really interesting because it's the hinge.

Consider the difference between dukkha and dukkha-lakkhana, the universal characteristic of dukkha. Where there is self, dukkha is mine. This is my dukkha. It belongs to me. It is screwing up my life. You seem to be getting away with it—you're okay. What about me? This is dukkha that is not the universal characteristic of dukkha. It's dukkha mixed with self. It's *my* dukkha.

But when we actually start to perceive dukkha as not mine, but simply built into nature—that this is the nature of things—then strangely enough, the relationship to it lightens up. It's not mine anymore. It's just the fabric of the universe. It's not "Oh my God, I'm sick and eventually I'm going to die." It's: that's right. Every creature that is born dies. It's built into the system, and I'm just traveling through that cycle. The relationship there is much lighter.

The best expression of this I came across was in Thailand, at Wat Suan Mokkh, Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery. He had built this big building which he called a Spiritual Theater—it was like a dharma museum with lots of exhibits. And he had paintings on the wall. My favorite painting was this very small painting showing a fat Chinese-style monk doing a qigong stretch. He had a big grin on his face. And underneath was a little poem in Thai, translated into English as: "Oh boundless joy! Now I see there is no happiness in this world."

It sums up the teaching. Buddhadasa was always good for a brain-twisting aphorism. I find it very good.

This is dukkha mixed with not-self, and then it's a whole different thing. One can go through the dukkha jnana—which is literally the understanding of pain, of dukkha—but that understanding sees the universality of it, and therefore senses it's not about me. It's okay.

And from that, compassion arises—universal compassion. It's about samsara. It's about the human condition. And it's okay. I'm going to do something about it. I can always do something.

So I'm going to do something about it, but I'm not going to be overwhelmed by it. There's no need. And no benefit either.

And of course, although we talk about this process as sequential, it's actually a nonlinear system. If something is anicca, it's also dukkha and anatta. If something is dukkha, it's also anicca and anatta. If something is anatta, it's also dukkha and anicca. They always come together.

Now, people sometimes do, in their practice, experience it according to that system because they're going gradually deeper. But in fact, people's experiences can be all over the place. They can find themselves in particular ñanas where, if it was a strictly linear system, they would have no business being there at all. But there they are. What to do?

I have to say, I've actually not heard that idea articulated before—dukkha as your actual personal experience of unsatisfactoriness, just sort of "this sucks," versus dukkha as the universal characteristic, and drawing a distinction between those two things. And that actually, once you see clearly—especially through seeing not-self and through seeing impermanence—your personal dukkha is maybe not there in the same way. It creates a relationship with the universal characteristic of dukkha that's not intrinsically painful. It's a relationship of understanding and an almost nonchalant acceptance of that which is simply the case.

But you notice that it does have the heart connection. With anicca, impermanence, change—the perception of it is predominantly cognitive. "Oh, I can see things are changing." When you get into dukkha, the perception is affective. It's the affective relationship. That's where you enter into the realm of craving, drivenness, upadana, appropriation, clinging. And not-self kind of brings them together.

So the way that insight develops is both head and heart. And a lot of the purification of the heart takes place within the Dukkha Ñana. Not always fun. Very valuable though. It's when the tears come that you know you're getting deep.

It took a while for me to figure out, especially across time zones.

Fair enough. So someone will have to climb a little bit of a mountaintop if they want to get the teachings.

The mountaintop of your disorganization.

I need a manager. Maybe that could be someone's dāna—they can be your assistant.

So that brings us to the end of our talk. I enjoyed this so, so much, Patrick, and I appreciate you very, very much for being here with us.

Patrick, any final things you want to say before we close?

Just to thank you for the invitation. It's been fun to meet you. And if you want to do a retreat, I do Zoom retreats. The information is on the website. There's one in May, and the next one will be in October, I think, thereabouts.

So definitely check out Patrick's website to see what he's got going on in terms of retreats. And if you want

to try and sneak in a one-on-one lesson or interview, sounds like he's open to that.

On the website, on the front page is a contact form. You can send off an email.

Thank you so much for being here, Patrick. And to everyone who is here with us, thank you so much for your time, your attention, your questions, and your practice. I hope you all have a wonderful night.

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