Martin Aylward
Evolving Dharma: How Practice Transforms
Week One: “An Evolving Dharma”
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Hello, I'm Martin Aylward. I've been practicing dharma for over 30 years. I mostly grew up in the Theravada tradition but have had an influence from a lot of other contemplative traditions across the Buddhist world and the Hindu and Sufi world as well.

This series of talks I'm going to give is about the evolution of dharma practice, and I'll be encouraging you to think about how your practice has evolved over time and can continue to evolve. We'll also be looking at historical currents of evolution from the Buddha's life and the texts and my own examples.

We'll look at what we practice, how we practice, why we practice, and where we practice. What I mean by the *what* is the different specific practices that we might take up at different stages in the evolution of our practice. *How* we practice is how we engage with those different practices and the different kinds of attitudes we might find and how those get refined over time. We'll look at the *why*, the way we understand the goal, liberation, *nibbana*, and how our understanding of what a truly free life is deepens and changes over time. And then the *where* we practice concerns how we understand reality. That's where we're practicing: in reality. We might start off where reality seems like being a self in a world, and then our deepest understanding of that—of our relationship to reality, our emergence within reality—unfolds and changes and develops over time.

So in this first session, we'll look at what we practice. I'd like to reflect a little on the Buddha's own journey. If one looks back at the texts, the Buddha describes two very distinct ways of practice that he did. The first was a kind of gung-ho hardcore meditation, which he did for quite a long time, almost starving himself. These were called mortification practices, where one specifically denies the body any kind of ease or pleasure or rest or sustenance in order to pursue rarefied meditation states with the idea to somehow transcend this bodily realm and get out of here into some other refined, relieving realm of experience. Buddha did that for a long time,

mastering some of the absorption practices of his day, practicing with two reputed meditation teachers of his day, until that really didn't work anymore and he found himself weak and tired and exhausted and disappointed and discouraged. So that marks the end of the first phase.

And then Sujata, a wonderful local young woman, came and saw this poor, skinny, exhausted yogi collapsed under a tree and gave him a bowl of rice pudding. He ate that rice and was restored, and he realized that this hardcore ascetic way of practicing hadn't been so helpful—or at least, it may have been very helpful, but it wasn't anymore.

And that's really key, I think, for us. If you look at your practices, sometimes we take up something, maybe at the beginning of our practice, and of course we engage with it in a kind of deluded way because we meet our practice with the same mind state that we've been meeting all the other stuff of our life. A friend of mine says, "The way you do anything is the way you do everything." I can remember that myself, and maybe you can: engaging with practices in an intense way, a busy way, ultimately an unhelpful way. And then at some point one realizes, "Oh yeah, I've been going down a blind alley." So if that's the case for you, well, you're in good company because that's what happened to the Buddha.

That second stage was one where, in this newfound energy and clarity from eating rice pudding, the Buddha recalled being under a tree as a teenager, snoozing under the tree, watching some people work in the fields. He recalled being both very relaxed, nothing to do, relaxing in the shade of the tree, and simultaneously very attuned, really noticing the play of sunlight, maybe the smell of the grass or the trees, the sound of the people working in the fields. He realized that those two things crucially support each other: relaxation and attunement. Nothing to do, nowhere to go, and yet a real sensory aliveness. And that transformed his practice.

Then, famously, he sat down under what's become the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya with that resolve to sit and to walk and to live and to practice in that way, relaxed and attuned. Maybe you've had that kind of shift in your own practice from a practice that seemed like you were trying to get to some specific state—trying to empty the mind or trying to get to peace, bliss, stillness, clarity, or something—to a practice where you think, "Rather than trying to get somewhere, let me actually be where I am, to relax into where I am, to open to where I am, to attune to what's actually happening here in awareness right now."

So then there's the famous night of awakening, the moment after dawn after a long night of awakening. We get that impression of a single moment of great clarity and awakening. There's the whole line, "Housebuilder, you'll build this house no more; your ridgepole is broken; etc.," the idea that the tendency to identify with body and mind, to make one's experience into being a self moving through a world, is gone. That's shattered and undone.

It's tempting to imagine this practice as leading to one crashing, great moment of awakening and then enlightened retirement. But actually, the Buddha then talks about spending seven weeks digesting, just staying there and digesting that experience. That's also a shift in practice: from imagining that we're practicing toward some great moment of awakening to allowing for the process of experience being digested.

We sometimes see these two models, which are called sudden awakening or gradual awakening, as if they're two different things: that there's a gradual path—*bhavana*, cultivation, better, better, better, with the idea of eventually arriving at best—or this sense that mind, by its nature, is completely free and at any moment, we can see through our habits and fears and delusions and patterning to the natural, inherent, immediate freeness of things. But that's another way our practice evolves: we go beyond the idea of it being one or the other. The Buddha's story confirms

that through this moment of clarity, dawn on the night of awakening, and then seven weeks of digesting.

Sometimes I think that when we have a moment or an experience in our practice where things feel particularly illuminated, clear, or transformed, the experience itself fades rather quickly because that's what experiences do, all of them. But we have the capacity to digest that experience or to live one's way into the light of that experience. If you've had a moment of experience where you've seen, for example, that you're not fundamentally separate from everything else but mind belongs to the whole of life and is an expression of the whole of life, the intensity of that experience will dissolve and fade after a few moments or a few hours or a few days. But the way we practice is to live as if that's true, to treat other people as if they're not as separate from us as our perception might tell us in any given moment.

So we have this procession of the Buddha describing his own journey of awakening, leading up to and beyond awakening, and we have the opportunity to take that on as a way to keep our own questioning alive: What do I practice? What do I emphasize in my practice? At some moments, it might be particularly helpful to emphasize steadiness. That doesn't mean we're going to be completely steady. But it means that again and again and again, thousands of times, when we notice our attention wandering off into the latest delusion, we have a willingness to just keep dropping it and dropping it and and coming back and coming back. It's very simple.

That kind of commitment might be very, very helpful sometimes, committing to steadiness. What's my practice? Steady presence. At other times, it might be equally important to focus on something else like gentleness, tenderness, forgiveness, actually having the inner climate and the atmosphere of one's experience be friendly so that we're able to greet all the crazy stuff that happens in this mind without making a fuss. That commitment to gentleness, that cultivation of

gentleness, can soak into the way we meet ourselves, the way we meet each other, and the way we meet each moment.

Sometimes we get the idea that there's a best practice, a right practice, a most powerful practice. But different practices and different qualities or nuances of practice might be most appropriate for us at different times as our practice evolves, as our understanding evolves, as our recognition of what's helpful, what's needed, or what's skillful evolves.

Later on, Ananda, the Buddha’s cousin and attendant, asks him, "What do you mostly practice these days? What's your way of meditating?" The Buddha says that he mostly practices emptiness meditations now. So that's just interesting to sense that evolution.

In the Culasunnata Sutta, he describes establishing a unified field of experience, first by reflecting on what's not here and just leaving it alone. In this context of me sitting here in this room, it might be to forget the other people and places and situations of my life and just to come into the focus of just this room, just this room, letting the senses, the seeing and the hearing and the sitting, really land here in this room. And then there's another simplifying, just letting this room be empty, not holding to this room as solid or real, but just the feeling of *here*.

A sense of the earth beneath and the way body is resting here. And then there's a progressive way that this here is the singleness of just the earth element beneath, letting that sense of here get ever more fine. Here is the place I'm in now. This is the Moulin de Chaves, where I live and teach. And then here is this room, and then here, the feeling of ground, and then here, just the immediacy of this experience, and then here, the awareness in which all these perceptions are coming and going. Here, the wide open space of awareness itself. And then here, the fundamental brilliance and knowingness of this awareness, just attuning to that. And then here, the goneness, the no-thingness.

I won't go through all the steps of the Culasunnata Sutta. You can look it up if you're interested. But that's the first part of the Buddha describing that refinement of hereness, we could say, a refinement of the imminence of awareness and the empty nature of everything coming and going.

So as we come to the end of this part of this talk, think for yourself: How has your practice changed over time? What did you start off practicing, and what are you practicing with now? If your practice has some longevity of months, maybe years, maybe decades, it's helpful to trace that evolution. It's a good way of recognizing the way that your sensitivity and understanding and attunement have evolved over time. It's a way to recognize what's helpful and to have the capacity to drop something that no longer serves you and use something that does serve you.

It's like the Buddha's image of the raft. The raft is a really good thing for crossing a river. But once you've crossed the river, the raft is a useless thing. Once you've got to the other side, don't pick the raft up and take it with you. It's going to be heavy. Leave it, and then maybe you want some hiking boots for the next part of the journey. You're finding a practice that fits where you're at, and where you're at is a changing, evolving, deepening process.

So that's a little walk around what we practice. In the next talk, I'll give some attention to how we practice, some of the attitudes that we have, the less helpful attitudes we often start off with, and how those will evolve over time. So I'll see you back here for Week 2.