

Martin Aylward

*Evolving Dharma: How Practice Transforms*

Week Two: "Methodology: The Evolution of What We Practice"

September 10, 2022



Hello, this is the second talk in this series of talks about the evolution of dharma practice and understanding. In these remaining three talks, I'm going to talk about the methodology, the ideology, and the cosmology of practice. That means how we actually engage and the way that evolves over time, why we practice, and how we view the goal, the liberation, that is at the heart of dharma practice and how our understanding of that evolves over time. The cosmology means how we understand the reality in which we live and practice, which can radically change, in fact. Certainly, if I look back on my own practice, in all three areas, there's been a lot of waking up to various unhelpful or limited views that I had early on.

So first, methodology, or how we practice. Here's the invitation for you to give a little thought to that: How has your understanding of meditation, for example, changed over time? For myself, I can see three main areas, which is what I'll focus on in this talk.

The first is the evolution of a practice that's trying to get somewhere, trying to get past faults or trying to get to a peaceful state, to one in which we actually are willing to rest into where we are here. We could call that the evolution from trying to resting or from getting somewhere to being where we are. Of course, so much of meditation language is about just being with what is, being where one is, and yet it's so easy, maybe subtly or maybe not even so subtly, for us to be trying to get to somewhere where I can be where I am.

That can be quite subtle, the sense of somehow leaning beyond this moment, to an imagined present moment, or to an imagined meditative state. We could equally call that evolution or transformation one from goal to process.

It's hard work sometimes, sitting quietly doing nothing. It's hard work when there's the sense that there's something I should do, something I need to have happen. At some point, we realize that that's kind of futile. We realize the hard work of that. We realize that by trying to bring about a

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certain experience, we're inevitably in conflict with or pushing away the experience that's already here. So the invitation, we realize, is that this moment, body like this, mind like this, world like this, is the theater of our practice. It is the open doorway to deepening.

So by reflecting on this, maybe I'm offering you a way to speed up the evolution of your practice. I'd like to encourage you to reflect now as you're listening and when you engage in your different practices and all through the day, whether it's in the formal practice of meditation or the informal practice of every other moment of life: Are you subtly or not so subtly more invested in trying to go somewhere or get something, or can the predominant focus keep going back to where you are, how you are, here you are? Can the predominant focus be letting this immediately hold you, letting yourself rest into this experience? And then it'll open up inevitably.

It's very hard for something to open up when you're trying to push past it towards something else. But the more you enter into and make room for and rest with what's already here, the more naturally what's here will open up and reveal more of itself, more depth, more dimensionality, more possibility, more insight.

The second big area of evolution, and it might be a surprising one, is from mind to body. We often think of dharma practice and meditative endeavors as being a kind of mind training or mindfulness. That often means that our meditation practice is overly mental. We realize that our mind is busy and complicated, and so we try to work with mind, quieting the mind, exploring the mind, etc. But that tends to be a rather chin-up kind of a practice. Because a lot of us are cognitively overstimulated anyway, mentally overstimulated, we tend to bring that same attitude into the way we meditate.

It's very interesting, I think, that the Buddha's term *yoniso manasikara*, which is usually translated as embodied awareness, literally means womb awareness. Sometimes I call it

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bellyfullness rather than mindfulness. The evolution that tends to happen over time is we realize that we're meditating mentally, and we let our attention drain down. Rather than the mental language we might use of observing the breath, for example, or watching my sensations, that top-down attention can evolve into actually inhabiting experience, being intimate with experience, knowing, feeling, sensing, inhabiting experience from the inside.

That's actually the language that the Buddha uses in the texts every time he gives meditation instructions. If you look at the Mahasatipatthana Sutta or the other main teachings on mindfulness, he talks about knowing the breath from inside the breath, knowing the body from inside the body, in short, knowing experience from inside the experience, and how that translates into an evolving sense of how to practice. In the Mahasatipatthana Sutta, for example, or in the Buddha's general instructions on meditation, there's always that encouragement to know the breath, for example, from inside the breath, to feel the sensations from inside the sensations, to know experience from the inside.

How that translates experientially is to a sense of realizing we're a whole body meditating, that everything's alive and that consciousness doesn't have a location other than here. Consciousness certainly isn't actually based in your head. Your brain is in your head; your mind isn't. And so we learn to actually let mind and body blend, to let the sense of being awake run through the whole sphere of embodied experience, to meditate as a full field of experience, rather than just as a busy mind.

The third significant shift was from object to awareness. What that means is that when we begin practicing, we often are focused on the object of attention. That might be breath, for example. It seems to me that I keep bringing my attention back to my breathing, and that's what it's all about. It's all about how much I can be with my breathing, how fully I can feel the breathing, how

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deeply I can get inside the breathing, how long I can keep my attention on the breathing. But it's not.

What the Buddha discovered under the Bodhi tree wasn't how to breathe. Breathing is a really helpful object. It's neutral, and it tends to have a harmonizing effect on body and mind. It demonstrates the fundamental movement of everything in the universe. The expansion of the in-breath has the sense of the breath coming to life, and then the out-breath tends to fade and soften. Then there's that gap at the end of the out-breath where the breath dies into stillness.

But most fundamentally, the process of meditation isn't about the object. So when we hear, for example, "awareness of breath," we tend to first of all hear it as awareness of *breath*, and all the attention goes to the object, the breath or the sensations or whatever it is.

Later on, we might start to understand the same thing as *awareness* of breath. So the breath is that which I'm using as a reference point to engage with the miraculous, inconceivable fact that I'm aware, that awareness is here. That breath is happening, coming and going within awareness. That thoughts are coming and going within awareness. That everything comes and goes within awareness. And in the midst of all this coming and going, this changing texture of breathing, these dancing sensations of bodily life, these flickering things of thoughts, ideas, images, and impressions, awareness isn't coming and going in the same way. That awareness is the open field, always here, always available, always present, always wakeful, in which the breath can be known, in which the capacities of meditation for steadiness and attunement and openness and gentleness can be cultivated.

For me, that was a huge shift: from fixating on the object of meditation to relaxing into the always available awareness of meditation. One cannot make one's adherence to objects be steady because the nature of mind is that it moves.

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Mind produces thoughts. It's the most natural thing in the world. It's as natural for mind to think as it is for eyes to see or ears to hear. But seeing and hearing and thinking can be known in awareness, welcomed into awareness, made room for in awareness, met in awareness, clearly seen within awareness.

So please consider for yourself now: Where's the main focus of your practice? Where's the hope of your practice? If you're really honest, are you trying to control the objects of experience or fix the objects of experience or tie your practice to the objects of experience? It may be very helpful to train your attention by focusing on breath or some other object. But it's equally helpful and equally important to be able to recognize all that's happening.

The focus on breath isn't always available. Awareness is always available. You are aware right now. Otherwise, you couldn't hear these words. The fact that you can hear, see, sense, think is the evidence of the awareness in which all your experience is swimming.

And that's a really significant evolution of our practice because it means that our practice suddenly is always right here, always available, nothing left out. Every moment is a moment of practice. Every moment is a meeting with life. Every moment and every object of attention confirms the awareness in which it's happening.

We've discussed three significant changes: from trying to get somewhere to being where we are; from meditating as a mind to what we could call a full-spectrum, fully embodied practice; and from trying to fiddle with or control objects to resting as the awareness in which they're all coming and going.

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I hope this is helpful for your own evolution of practice and understanding. Next week, we'll look at the why of practice, the goal of practice, and how that evolves over time. We'll talk about liberation, freeness of being, *nibbana*, and a problem-free life. I'll see you then.