



I'm John Peacock. What I would like to speak about today is the role of meditation and awareness in a topic very close to my own heart, which is the topic of ethics.

I've been involved in the dharma going back 50-plus years to when I was 17 and first came across Tibetan Buddhism. I was involved in Tibetan Buddhism for a long time, living in monasteries in India. After that, I went to Sri Lanka and studied there so I have a perspective on both sides.

I became an academic when I returned home from studying in India. So I have quite a long background.

Meditation

What I want to do first of all, is just settle by taking some time to connect with the body and create some stillness before I begin to speak.

So if we can close our eyes and center the body. Just come into your body and feel its weight, bringing your awareness to the sense of the heaviness of the body sitting here, possibly on a chair, maybe sitting on the floor. Wherever you are, it doesn't really matter.

Begin to feel the body here. Be aware of that body.

Become aware of the myriad sensations, a huge number of sensations, which course through the body.

You might feel for example, if you're sitting in a chair, your feet touching the floor. Certainly you'll feel your bottom sitting on your seat and the sensations arising from that.

Just being aware of the touch of your clothing on your body, things that we encounter virtually all the time, every time we sit, every time we stand, every time we dress ourselves.

We have all these sensations arising, and of course our awareness is somewhere else.

So we just spend these few moments connecting with something that's occurring for us all the time, that we often don't have much awareness of.

We might feel, for example, the touch of the air on our skin. The warmth or the coolness on exposed skin.

Depending on how we have our hands, whether our hands are on our thighs, we may feel the gentle pressure of them resting there.



Feeling the heaviness of the hands, that slight pressure, the warmth perhaps coming from them. Or just one hand resting in another and that reciprocal touch that's occurring.

This may not seem a lot, but this is opening ourselves up to the primacy of some of our experience. Touching in with what's actually occurring for us right now. Not thinking about it, but just experiencing it.

Of course we may just want to touch in with the constant breath that gives us life. As we breathe in, as we breathe out, and the sensations that arise from that breath. We're not trying to control them. We're not trying to create sensations. We're just experiencing them.

What does it feel like to breathe? What sensations can you feel as your abdomen expands, as your chest expands in an in-breath. Perhaps the experience of cool or warm air entering your body, and the sensations as you exhale as well.

Again, we're just experiencing something which is occurring. Which is actually life occurring for all of us at this moment. As life breathes us, as we experience that coming and going of the breath, not controlling it. Just observing it. Connecting in with it. Just noticing the difference in sensations arising between the in and the out-breath.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes, and I'll say a little bit about what we've done.

What Is Our Meditation Practice For?

I've just introduced a very short meditation. For those who've done lots of meditation, this won't be unfamiliar. It is probably extremely familiar to you.

What I want to talk about today is: why do we do these things?

If we don't take meditation, the awareness practices, the contemplative practices that we engage in into the sphere of something beyond merely mystical or something which is giving us nice experiences, then what is it for?

Why do we engage in these awareness practices? Why do we hone that awareness? Why do we develop the skill? And it is a skill, which we call mindfulness. A moment-to-moment, attentiveness to your experience? Why do we do this?

I want to put those practices and that awareness that we're developing into a bigger story than just nice experiences, and possibly even mystical experiences. I want to put it into a sphere of being with others. Before I touch into that let me just pose a question.



When we engage in questions about our lives, such as, *What do I want to do? How do I want to live? How do I want to be?*, we don't often think about this as being ethics.

Yet, these are very fundamental ethical questions. More often than not, ethics is usually thought of as a system of rules. Systems of “don't do's.” We're all familiar with that.

The Precepts

Particularly coming from Christian or Judaic backgrounds, we often have a long list. Even Buddhism has a list of precepts, which we engage in. These precepts are much bigger for monastic communities than they are for lay communities.

These precepts often look like a list of “don't do's.” That's all. Yet they are really fallback options. Options that we go back to when we can't discern the direction that we need to take in any particular situation.

If we're talking about the “don't do's,” taking the Buddhist list of the precepts, we don't engage in harm. The first precept is about not harming.

Interestingly, of course, it always comes as a rule of training. This is the way it's referred to *sikkhapada* in Pali, something which is a rule of training. As a rule of training, as we move through our lives, we try not to harm. As a rule of training, we try not to take what is not offered to us, and we have five of these that I won't go into more detail on.

Developing Awareness in the Day-To-Day

Yet, we can't reduce the notion of ethics to this list of five factors. If we try to do that, we lose something which is incredibly important, which is the ways of developing our awareness to bring to the situations that we find ourselves in on a day-to-day basis.

We live not just in a changing world, we live in moment-to-moment changing situations, when we're face-to face with another. That other is often in a way asking something from us.

What is being asked? The first thing, for example, that one philosopher suggests is *don't hurt me*, non-harm. But how do we express that sense of non harm in this relationship, in this particular situation rather than just as a general rule that I don't engage in harm.

The moment we're with another, no matter if it be in an office situation, or your personal relationships, encountering another person in the checkout at the supermarket, we're engaging in an ethical situation. Often we don't read it in that way.



Often we read it in a very utility based way. What does this person do for me? Do they function well, or don't they function well for me? Does this person give me what I want, or don't they give me what I want?

Interestingly enough, when we are engaged in those kinds of readings of the situations we're in, we sometimes fall very into that objectification trap, where we don't see the other person. We don't see their needs, we don't enter into the ethical relationship with that person.

Why Awareness is Necessary

What I'm telling you is a story, a story about why awareness is necessary. Why this acute awareness that we develop in our contemplative practices, in even just the little practice that we've just done. Why do we pay attention to something like our bum on the seat? Or our hands resting one on another? Or clothing touching the body? What is of interest in that?

I'd say everything is of interest in that, because it's reading where we are at this moment with what is arising at this moment. In the big ethical scheme of things, it really doesn't matter that much. But in saying that, I think we do ourselves a disservice.

Because when we come into this moment, replete as this moment is, with all kinds of information and all kinds of things which are being given to us in our experience, how do we make sense of it?

Holding the mind steady, being able to focus on such a simple thing as the arising of a sensation of this moment is a unique training. It is a unique training to be able to take into our ordinary life.

Not to sit here forever and a day with our eyes closed, concentrating on me, what's happening with me, but to open our eyes and to see a world that we're in interrelationship with. The moment we're in an interrelationship and asking ourselves the questions: How do I live? What do I do? Where do I go? How do I treat this person? The moment we ask those questions we're entering into an ethical relationship.

Entering Into an Ethical Relationship With a Collected Mind

So what we're doing in this very specific training that we engage in, we can call it samatha, or we can call it vipassana. These are all terms that we find in the early texts, but not in use in quite the same way as they are in meditative traditions now.

So we have the sense of gathering the mind, that samatha, which is calming and gathering, not concentrating. That's one of the words I'd like to banish actually, is the idea of concentrating.



I think of a sort of screwed up mind or all tight. I used to have teachers at school say, *Concentrate!* when they really want to concentrate on something.

That's not what we're trying to do. What we're trying to do is gently gather the mind. A very good image that I use in the UK when I'm teaching is the image of the sheepdog gathering sheep and collecting the sheep, rounding them up. You can't have a savage sheepdog because it doesn't do his job very well; he would damage or hurt the sheep.

If you think of our thoughts like sheep being gathered gently into the fold, unifying. That's what we're attempting to do.

That unified mind is a very powerful thing to take out into our ordinary life situations. If you take nothing away from this talk other than this: the moment we're involved with people, the moment we're involved with animals, with the environment, we're in an ethical situation. It requires an ethics of responsibility. In order to be responsible, we need to be aware. We need to have started to hone, gather and collect that mind.

A collected mind is very useful. But a mind that is only collected has its limitations. We take that collected mind and we apply it in certain ways.

Many of you who may have been involved in meditation for quite a long time may be very familiar with how we apply it in different ways, in what are often called analytic types of vipassana meditations, where we apply it, for example to seeing who I am.

Who is this individual sitting here, breathing at this moment in time? Are we with the body? Are we with the breath? There's questions about the self and who we are involved in that.

So we take it and we apply it in a certain way. This is what we're doing with this development of awareness. By gathering the mind and then being able to apply that gathered mind in our situations, but not in our situations just in a meditative sense. That's very nice. And sometimes we really need to spend some time away gathering ourselves together, collecting ourselves.

Life as it is, lived in the contemporary world with scattered fragments, it pulls us in all sorts of different directions. It can be your work, your family, all the demands that are there on us in the contemporary lifestyle, which hasn't gotten any easier. I think most of us must admit that it hasn't gotten easier with the development of mobile technologies and that we have our lives getting pulled in even more directions than they did, say 50 years ago when I began on this path.



So we need to recollect ourselves. It's interesting that the word *Sati* in Pali has that sense of recollection. Of course, this is the word that usually gets translated just as mindfulness. We're re-collecting ourselves, remembering what we're doing, remembering what we're engaged in. What I would like to suggest to you is, this is an important factor to take out into your ordinary life.

Where Does it Really Matter?

Where is the test? It is not sitting on the cushion. You can have some very nice experiences. You can have some beautiful things happen to you. You can certainly become much more centered and much more calm through these practices.

But where it's really going to count, where it's really going to matter is when you take it into your daily lives. Let's not get too enthusiastic about this and think, of course, we're going to be able to take this out immediately, and everything's going to be wonderful because I can apply this in my own situation.

No, of course not, we're going to be forgetful. It's interesting, isn't it, that when we talk about recollection and remembering something, the first thing we've got to remember is to be collected in the situation. To be centered, to be receptive, to be responsible, to be ultimately—and I'm using this in a much wider sense than I've suggested to you earlier on—to be ethical. To be ethical is to live and to dwell in a particular way.

Ancient Greeks had a very good notion of this, the idea of *ethos*, that idea of ethics was the idea of the way that you dwelt in this world. That was one of the meanings of this particular word. You dwell in the world in a particular way. So we ask ourselves the question: how are we dwelling?

What is our normal way of living in this world? Is it through the classic Buddhist trio of greed, aversion, and delusion? Confusion is a better term rather than simply delusion. We're very confused about how to live our lives a lot of the time.

Or are we trying to apply this sense of remembering and recollecting and bringing ourselves into much more ethical relationships. That is not applying a rule. That is really opening to what this situation needs?

Becoming an Acute Reader

I've always been a great reader throughout my life. I started when I was very young and read copiously. I can't remember when I didn't have books. If you could see my room where I'm sitting now, I'm just surrounded by books all over the place. One of the things you develop through reading is a very acute way of reading. You read poetry in one way, you read novels in another way, you read biographies, and factual books in other ways.



You have to become an acute reader to receive what's within those different forms. In a way, what our awareness is doing is allowing us to become acute readers of life. An acute reader of life and all the situations that I step into.

We don't have to make big deals out of these blaise situations, just being in the supermarket with the person behind the checkout, who has their own problems and what they bring to their work with them.

As I try to rush to get whatever I need to get, and to get out and to get back home, or however it may be: How do I read that situation? How do I deal with it? How can I bring such things as virtues of kindness and compassion into those situations, even when the demands are other than those? How can I do that?

These are really the ethical questions that I think are being asked of us. So that when I come into that face-to-face situation with somebody, there's a responsibility to how I am with that person. How I am with that person in this moment.

Sila, Samadhi, and Panna: A Circular Path

If I was going to put this back into the Buddhist picture from where I started, we usually have this trinity of things that we speak about in Buddhism, which is *sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna*. For those who are not familiar with these words, *sila* is usually the ethical dimension. *Samadhi* is usually concentration, that word I don't particularly like, and *panna*, which is usually translated as wisdom, which I feel is another awful translation, which is really an acute understanding of something. So I have an acute understanding of life and the way that we live.

And somehow it makes it seem that we overcome the first stage. The *sila* part is usually called the moral or ethical side of it, and it somehow gets bypassed on our way to this wisdom or understanding. We somehow leave behind the ethical side.

I think, actually, it's circular. We start from an ethical basis, we develop that honing of the mind, that settling of the mind. In order to gain greater understanding, the smarter you can be all sorts of ways that we gather the mind, settle the mind, being able to take it out into ordinary life, in order to really understand what's going on in this moment, either with my life, or with your life, as much as we can. With what's going on in, in our life world, now, which includes many, many others.

Then it feeds back into the whole ethical *sila* project. Now, I have to say that the word *sila* doesn't translate either as ethics or morals very easily in Buddhism. Yet, what we're really speaking about are ethical virtues.

Skillful and Unskillful Factors

There's a very misunderstood aspect of Buddhist literature, which is called the *Abhidhamma*.



Part of the reason why I ended up studying Theravada was to study the Abhidhamma. In the tradition I was in initially, it was not considered as being the most important dimension. Yet what is fascinating about this is the Abhidharma offers as an ethical psychology.

It's a wonderfully comprehensive way of looking at our minds. It says our minds are composed of many factors. I won't go into how many, but there's a lot of factors that compose the mind. If we look at them from the most basic elements, they divide into two elements, which is what is called *kusala* and *akusala*.

Kusala is skillful. Akusala is what is unskillful. The *kusala* factors are also referred to as *sobhana*, which means beautiful. Those beautiful factors are mindfulness, non-hatred, non-violence, and many other factors which we would consider to be the basic virtues.

The akusala factors, the unwholesome factors, or unskillful factors are anger, jealousy, hatred, all of these things that are not beautiful. They don't even have an unbeautiful tag to them, they're just not beautiful.

What we're doing is trying to move the mind away from that akusala dimension of our thoughts and actions being dominated by what is unskillful, to being able to live much more skillfully. At the heart of that, at the very center of that, is the development of awareness. But awareness doesn't just sit here with me on a cushion or on a chair.

Bringing Awareness to Each Situation

Engaging in these practices, awareness is taken out into that world where we manifest, hopefully kusala. And if we don't manifest them, we try again, with awareness by recollecting and remembering what often gets forgotten in our daily lives because we so easily forget.

I don't know if we're so conscious of that. We probably go out most days with good intentions. Particularly if you're a so-called "good Buddhist," you go out with a good intention every day and suddenly find at the end of that day, *what happened?* You suddenly veer off and back into habitual patterns.

The habitual patterns are often very unskillful. The more we engage in those habitual patterns, the more they become sedimented. The more we bring that memory, that remembrance that perhaps the situation needs something different. Perhaps it doesn't need anger, perhaps it needs listening. Perhaps it needs compassion. Perhaps it needs kindness, generosity, whatever.

Only you will know that if you bring awareness into that situation, and that's what I mean about the relationship between ethics and awareness. You bring awareness so you can see what this situation needs



by reading it closely. Just as I would sit down and read a book very closely and try to glean and see as much within as possible.

So rather than developing awareness and these contemplative practices to have nice experiences which I certainly wouldn't denigrate, it's more so that we can take that awareness into the situations in our life that we find ourselves in.

Those situations are always asking us to respond in a particular way. We're bringing our awareness to that. So that we can have, I'm going to play with the word here, not just a response, but a responsibility for how I am in that situation.

That ability to respond. The ability to respond is arising through the awareness that we develop, as we sit on our cushions. As we develop these particular practices, gather the mind, gain certain understandings about the way things are. So that we can go into life and really respond in that moment-to-moment, minute-to-minute, hour-by-hour, day-by-day way.

That, for me, is what ethics is. It's that response and responsibility. And that's why we need awareness.