Deepening Practice (5/5): Letting Change Teach Us

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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It's such a pleasure to practice together. Thank you. It touches me deeply. So, here we are in our fifth Dharmette on this series about deepening practice. This week we've been exploring a teaching from the Meghiya Sutta (AN 9.3 or Udana 4.1). In this teaching, the Buddha offers five supports that help practice deepen.

For anyone who's joining us for the first time, or if you've forgotten what we've been doing earlier in this week, Meghiya[2] was a monk who was serving as the Buddha's attendant. One day he saw this beautiful mango grove and thought it would be a great place to meditate. He went to the Buddha and said, "I'd like to go meditate there at the mango grove," and eventually the Buddha agreed.

Meghiya goes to the mango grove and meditates, but it doesn't unfold as he had imagined. His mind was harassed. I love this word *harassed*—some other translators use *stalked*. His mind was stalked by thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty. Surprised by what happened, he goes back to the Buddha and shares what had happened.

Then the Buddha gives him five things that will support the deepening of his practice. Earlier in the week, we looked at spiritual friendship, ethical living (living life with care), and beneficial conversations (conversations that open the heart). Yesterday we explored effort, like our participation in practice. Today we come to the fifth and final support: wisdom that sees arising and passing away.

The Buddha introduces all five of these supports with an interesting phrase. He says to Meghiya, "When the heart's release is not ripe (*paripakka*[3]), five things help it ripen." I love this kind of expression. We don't see this so commonly. It's in there throughout the suttas, but it's not as common as we might think. This language of maturation and ripening points to the fact that things develop. It's not that we can simply command them to happen. If we could command them to happen, we would have done it already, and I would have told you exactly how to do it so that we could all be living with as much freedom as possible. It's so much different than forcing ourselves towards this goal; it's creating the conditions in which maturation can happen.

This fifth support has a little bit different quality than the first four. The Buddha is pointing towards wisdom that sees arising and passing away, which leads to the ending of suffering. So it's not just any old wisdom. He's defining wisdom as a way of seeing arising and passing away, seeing changing in a manner that leads to the ending of suffering.

The question isn't just about what conditions can be cultivated, but also what can be understood about experience itself. What can be learned about experience? The Buddha says it must be understood in a way that is noble and penetrative. This idea of *noble* means this seeing, learning, and understanding happens in the service of liberation. We're learning in a way that loosens suffering. The idea of *penetrative* means it goes beyond cognitive learning or concepts. It goes to experiences, to what's actually happening. That's a different type of knowing.

So for this fifth support, the Buddha is pointing to wisdom that is noble and penetrative, that sees the arising and passing away of experiences in a way that leads to liberation. We all know about impermanence. It's not difficult to understand. We know the weather changes, bodies age, relationships change, and circumstances change. We know thoughts come and go, and moods change. We all know this. You don't need me or anybody else to tell you this.

But this knowing isn't exactly the same thing as wisdom. Because we can understand perfectly well that something is impermanent, and yet we are still surprised when it changes. We can know that a pleasant experience doesn't last, and yet we still reach for it, thinking that perhaps this time it will last. We can know that an unpleasant state will change, and yet we are still thinking, "Oh my gosh, this is going to be here forever." [Laughter]

It's quite something how we know things change, and yet the Buddha is pointing to a different type of knowing. This different type of knowing comes from letting experiences teach us, letting learning happen. It is the recognition that everything arises and passes away—every conditioned thing. It's not just that everything is impermanent, but also the understanding that things arise because of conditions, and when those conditions change, the experiences change. In this way, we're not simply waiting for unpleasant experiences to disappear, nor are we trying to make a pleasant experience last. Instead, we're learning from the changing.

Getting back to our friend Meghiya, his difficult meditation might look a little bit different if we use this lens. He went to the mango grove wanting solitude, and he found this beautiful place. I assume he was expecting to have a pleasant experience because he expressed so much surprise when he described his mind being harassed by difficult thoughts. But what looked like an obstacle or a problem can actually become a teacher. The question can shift from, "How do I get rid of these thoughts that are harassing me?" to "Is there something to be learned from this?" Maybe it becomes clear that it is like this because of conditions. Maybe Meghiya was feeling angry towards some of the other monks he was living with, and wanted to go to the mango grove to avoid them. We don't know.

Instead of being disappointed or trying to make things the way we want them to be, can we look at our experiences and ask what can be learned? This changes what we think about the maturation and deepening of practice. It doesn't mean that nothing uncomfortable ever arises

again. It doesn't mean we will only have pleasant experiences, or that we can finally make everything go the way we want. This maturation means a changing relationship to experience.

We stop treating every uncomfortable experience as a problem that has to immediately be rectified. When impermanence is more deeply understood, something loosens. There's a deep, noble, and penetrative recognition that things are changing, and an understanding that our experience doesn't need to be held quite so tightly. This holding tightly might be our attempt to make an experience go away or stay longer. If an experience doesn't remain precisely the way we want it to be, we don't have to organize our entire life and all our attention around trying to keep it or get rid of it. We know it's going to change.

This wisdom supports letting go. Not because we've convinced ourselves that we shouldn't cling, but because there's a deep, visceral understanding that what is being clung to can never provide what we're asking of it. It will never be a lasting source of happiness. It just can't be.

This whole series has been about conditions. Why does spiritual friendship matter? Because the people around us condition the mind. Why does ethical living matter? Because our actions have consequences, and what we repeatedly do shapes what follows. Why do beneficial conversations matter? Because what we hear and talk about can condition what we see. Why does effort matter? Because what we repeatedly do feeds what becomes stronger and weaker. And wisdom, this fifth support, starts to see this in a deep way. We start to see that experiences are conditioned: they arise when conditions are present, and they pass away when conditions change.

There's something quite beautiful about the Meghiya Sutta. I have a tender spot for Meghiya. He's doing his best and he's having difficulties. How many of us are doing our best and having difficulties? And the Buddha gives Meghiya conditions that support liberation. He doesn't shame Meghiya. He doesn't blame him or say, "You're a bad person." In my mind, it's something like, "Dear Meghiya, here's something that can help." That is born out of his love and care for his attendant.

Deepening practice isn't primarily about becoming increasingly successful at arranging our experience so it goes according to what we want. Deepening practice is about becoming increasingly able to meet experience, learn from experience, and see what experience is showing us.

Perhaps this is something we can carry with us from our week together: the changing or uncomfortable nature of experience isn't an obstacle. It's one of the things that practice is inviting us to understand and learn from. It is inviting wisdom to arise, so that wisdom can support letting go, which leads to greater and greater freedom—to the heart's release.

Thank you. It's been a pleasure practicing with you this week.

1. **Meghiya Sutta:** A discourse found in the Pali Canon (Udana 4.1 and Anguttara Nikaya 9.3) where the Buddha instructs his attendant Meghiya on the conditions necessary for the maturation of the mind. ↩
2. **Meghiya:** A monk who served as the Buddha's attendant prior to Ananda. ↩
3. **Paripakka:** A Pali word meaning ripe, mature, or fully developed. Often used in the context of the mind or spiritual faculties coming to maturity. ↩

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