Relax, Receive, Allow and Learn

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 54:40

On a retreat, any retreat, we spend a lot of time cultivating the conditions that support mindfulness. Tonight I'd like to explore some of the supports for us in this endeavor.

Mindfulness itself is, at least in my understanding and what is in the suttas, a quality or capacity of mind that basically creates the conditions for us to be aware of what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. And yet that quality itself is kind of neutral, because this capacity to be aware of what's happening in the present moment while it's happening can be applied to this practice, to curiosity about what's happening in the present moment. It can also be applied to something like being really quiet while sneaking through a house in order to steal things.

So what's the difference?

Part of the understanding—and the Buddha actually speaks in the suttas of this, though not in many places—is that there are references to what is called wrong mindfulness. Wrong mindfulness in the wrong Noble Eightfold Path is based in wrong view. That's how it's described: in one of wrong view, wrong intention arises. Wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration arise in one who has wrong view. The view of somebody sneaking through a house to steal things is one of greed, one of self-motivation. This is not what we would call directing the capacity of mindfulness towards understanding.

Understanding in particular what the Buddha pointed to—the freeing quality that mindfulness can point us toward, the freedom that mindfulness can guide us toward—comes when we are curious about understanding suffering. If that thief were curious about understanding suffering, the thief might recognize that the actual activity of mind happening in that moment of wanting to take something that belonged to somebody else is painful. That in the moment it is not conducive to a heart that feels free, a heart that has love and compassion.

From this perspective, the Buddha pointed us to understand that the foundation of our path is right view. In the Four Noble Truths, he pointed us to understand suffering, let go of the cause of suffering, realize that the letting go of suffering results in a release of freedom from suffering, and recognize that there is a path that can be used to cultivate this freedom.

The mindfulness of the Eightfold Path is this mindfulness of being aware of what's happening in the present moment, but it's mindfulness from a particular perspective. I'd like to describe this perspective in some really ordinary ways this evening.

One way to think about this perspective of how we bring this capacity of knowing what's happening in the present moment while it's happening is to consider curiosity about what is happening in the present moment as being something that is happening in the present moment.

That sounds like nothing. In mathematical terms it sounds like a tautology—if you're aware of what's happening in the present moment, you would be aware that it is happening in the present moment. And yet, actually, if we look at our minds, this is not what's going on usually in our habitual perspective, especially before we meet the practice.

Typically when something arises in our minds, even if we're aware of it, we are often at least somewhat caught by the energy of that, thinking we need to do something or follow on. If you were to go out into the world and notice somebody was angry and ask them, "Do you know you're angry?"—some stranger on the street—they would probably look at you like you're kind of nuts. "Yeah, of course I know I'm angry." But are they aware of anger in the moment as an experience that's happening in the moment? What the experience of anger actually is? What is the human experience of anger? Not "Are you angry, and what are you going to do about it?"—which is how most of us before we meet the practice would know anger.

This perspective, this shift in the use of mindfulness to be curious about experience happening in the present moment as phenomena, as experience happening in the present moment—whether that's the experience of the breath, the experience of a reactive emotion like anger, confusion, desire, or frustration, whether it's a beautiful quality of mind like love, compassion, patience, joy, ease, or peace—the perspective of mindfulness is curious about something along the lines of: What is it like to be a human being having this experience? What is it like to be a human being experiencing love, experiencing fear, experiencing anger? Opening to that side of the equation.

This is a simple shift, and yet it's a profound shift. There's a vast difference—and you all know this—between the experience of being with some reactive state of mind, being with frustration, versus being frustrated. We feel the difference. There's more spaciousness when we are with an experience.

So that's another way we can hold this perspective of mindfulness: Can we be with our experience? Can we keep ourselves company in an experience?

With something like a reactive emotion, fear for example, when that is arising, we get curious about what the inner experience is. How does it affect the body? How does it affect the mind? What is the human experience? What is it like to be a human being experiencing this?

In this practice of mindfulness, we are exploring all of our human experience. No part of our human experience is fundamentally antithetical to being mindful. There are certain experiences, of course, that make it more challenging to be mindful, but there's no particular state—except perhaps for non-mindfulness itself—no particular arising experience of which it's fundamentally not possible to be mindful. Even a state like spacing out, even a state like sleepiness—it is possible to be mindful of those

experiences. Nothing is left out. And yet there will be things that are challenging, so we'll speak about how to work with those experiences as well.

I'd like to talk about some of the supports that I've seen in my own practice that really help with this—holding this perspective, finding our way to this perspective, which is what supports us to move in the direction of freedom. As I said, being caught in reactivity basically reinforces those patterns, those habits. When we are feeling frustrated, feeling angry, that tends to reinforce those patterns of mind. But we can create a larger container in which mindfulness can hold frustration or anger or confusion—any experience. Mindfulness can hold it. And that creates the possibility for something different to happen: transformation around that reactive emotion, release around reactive emotions, and support for the growth of wholesome qualities.

If we're holding love in a container of mindfulness, it creates the conditions for love to strengthen. If we're holding frustration in a container of mindfulness, it creates the conditions for that frustration to transform and release. Mindfulness has this great, amazing capacity to strengthen the wholesome and allow a weakening and releasing of the unwholesome. This perspective that we're exploring to bring to our mindfulness is crucial for mindfulness to lead us towards freedom.

I'd like to describe some of the supports I've seen and speak about them in a really simple way. The first support is: relax.

When I first began meditating—probably for the first couple of years of my practice—I didn't hear this instruction. I don't think it was because it wasn't said, but I picked up on other parts of the instruction, and my personality, my mode of being, my usual habits of mind applied those habits to the meditation, which of course it would do. I thought that the way to freedom was to hold on to the breath as long as I could, to tightly hold on to experience, and to push my mind into experience so that I could see it as closely as possible and track it all. My mind was really busy.

When I finally really heard this teaching of relax, I began to understand that relaxing—relaxing the body as a start, as a place to begin—supports a very natural capacity to be present, to be aware in the present moment, to be aware of what's happening while it's happening. That capacity is supported by relaxation. As we relax the body, it supports the mind to be able to relax a little bit. And as the mind relaxes—well, basically a non-relaxed mind is one that is caught up in its ideas, its agendas, its opinions, its views, its worries and concerns about the past and the future. A mind that is not relaxed is usually not in the present moment, or if it is in the present moment, it's thinking about the present moment: What do I need to do about this present moment? How can I get the thing I need, get rid of the thing I don't want?

A relaxed mind puts us in a place where there's much more natural capacity to recognize what's here. When we relax, we can check in. So just relax the body—play with this a little bit right now, just relaxing the body, relaxing the mind. You can explore this through consciously relaxing. You can scan through the body and consciously find areas where there may be tension and see if there can be a softening or

relaxing around those areas. You can do that consciously.

I also like to offer an analogy that my colleague Gil Fronsdal offers for relaxing the mind. If you've consciously relaxed the muscles of the body, spent some time doing that—just as if your brain were a muscle—maybe the brain can relax too. There can be a conscious inclining towards relaxing, letting go of tension in our system, in our body and in our minds.

Another approach I've found really useful, especially the further I got into retreat: the more it felt like trying to do something was a little bit agitating. So what I began exploring was a kind of requesting—just sitting in my posture and then dropping a request into my system: May the body relax. And then seeing what happens. Not trying to do the relaxation, but just dropping that request in when you sit.

May the body relax. Try it right now.

May the body relax.

Is there any effect as you drop that into your system? Sometimes I found that that request actually created—or released—something that I didn't even know was being held. It's almost like our system, our organism understands in a way. When given a request like that, especially the more stability and the more settled the mind is, the more those requests are likely to have an effect. At times our system seems to have an understanding of things that we don't have conscious access to. And so sometimes we can use that.

May the body relax. May the mind relax. Don't even think about what that means. Just drop that in and see what effect it has on the body and mind. May the mind relax.

As the mind relaxes, there can be a kind of recognition that very simply, there is awareness. First of just this experience of relaxation. But then of just perhaps the body sitting here. Maybe the breath. Maybe hearing. Relaxation places us, puts us in a space where we can be more receptive to knowing what's happening while it's happening.

This is a second piece that I'd like to explore with you a little bit—this sense of receptive awareness. There's a quality in our attention where, when we are mindful, we can choose what we're going to attend to. We can direct our attention. We do this quite a bit in meditation at times, choosing to attend to the breath, for example. I would call that directing the attention. With mindfulness we can choose to direct the attention.

We can also, with mindfulness, choose to not consciously pick what we are paying attention to—to not choose, "Now I'm going to pay attention to the breath," but rather settle back and receive what's obvious. Letting go of controlling the choice to direct the attention. We can receive, almost like we can settle back and let experience come to us.

Right now, for instance, we'll play with these two just briefly. Let your attention rest in your hands. Notice the sensations of your hands. You can do that. And maybe now a breath. Let yourself be aware of a breath.

We can choose to direct the attention and be aware of that experience.

And then just play a little bit right now with letting go of choosing. Essentially just settle back and see what's obvious, what wants to come to you, what experience. Maybe it's hearing right now. Or maybe it's the breath, or body sensations, or an emotion. Letting go of choosing what wants to come into awareness.

A piece of this pointing that we're doing here is another support that was really helpful for me to begin to articulate to myself, especially again the deeper my practice went. The more practice I did, it began to be very useful to recognize and understand that there's a difference between attention and mindfulness.

Attention is that capacity of mind that picks something out of experience. It is amenable to conscious control, as we just explored there. We can choose to direct the attention to the breath, or to sounds, or to the body. So it's amenable to a conscious choice. And yet if we're not consciously choosing, that factor of attention is essentially being conditioned. Something will be brought into attention, and it will tend to be something that would come from the conditions that were here in the immediate preceding moments. When we're not choosing to step in and say, "I want to pay attention to this," the conditions give rise to something being brought into attention.

That's kind of that settling back and asking, what wants to come to you? What wants to come into attention? Something is picked up in attention there. But that factor of attention—of choosing something out of the environment to notice, essentially that's what I'd say attention is—is different from this quality of mindfulness, which is this capacity to know what's happening in the present moment while it's happening.

I'll give an example of how you all already know this distinction. If you are walking down the street or doing something that requires you to move through the environment in some way, you may be mindful of that—and you may also not be mindful of that. How many of you have walked to your room, forgotten mindfulness, but navigated the halls, the stairways, the turns, the doors? Something was attending. Something was attending to the experience. Attention, perception, knowing—the five aggregates, which we'll talk about at another time. But these processes of body and mind were attending to experience.

Mindfulness may not have been there, but attention was functioning. Attention was helping you to get to your room in some fashion. And yet, you've all experienced this. It's not like when mindfulness goes away that we start walking into things or tripping over things or losing our way.

So we all understand this difference, and yet somehow in my practice I thought that if I wasn't in charge of what object was being attended to, it meant I wasn't being mindful. I had conflated these two in some way.

It is possible for mindfulness to be present and we are not actively choosing what to pay attention to. This we could call choiceless awareness—choiceless in the sense that we are not consciously choosing. I like to call that receptive awareness, because we are simply settling back and receiving. So I appreciate that

distinction between receptive and directed awareness.

Another helpful piece for me was recognizing that I originally thought about these two—directing the attention and receiving—as being different things. If I was choosing to pay attention to the breath, I was kind of doing the whole thing. I was doing the tracking, I was doing the latching onto. But there's a way in which we can explore even as we direct the attention. What we could say is kind of allow the attention to come in on a particular area of our experience. We can direct attention to some aspect of our experience, and then receive that experience.

It's almost like how a radio works. A radio is a receiver. We tune to a particular frequency on a radio, but then the radio isn't going out and grabbing that frequency—it's still doing its job of just settling back, taking what comes in to that frequency. That's a kind of analogy for how we can direct the attention. For instance, right now, allow yourself to attune to the breath. But then receive what's there. You don't have to dive in and find anything or push the mind into it. What's obvious in the breath? What's naturally available to be received in the breath?

This receptive attention, relaxation, receptive attention—these are tools that are supports for any form of meditation. Even metta practice, for myself, began to become really alive when I shifted from looking for something and instead would just drop the phrases into the heart. "May you be happy." And then settling back and receiving. How does that phrase land? It's a kind of tuning to the heart channel and seeing how these phrases drop into the heart. What happens? How does it land?

So again, receiving—any practice we can explore this dynamic of directing and receiving. Sometimes the directing will be more helpful. Sometimes the receiving will be more helpful. There's kind of an art to this. It's not that we can tell you, do this for the first two minutes and this for the next five minutes. It really is very dependent on conditions. But it's worthwhile to explore this possibility of receiving experience—whether it's receiving in a directed way, attuning to the breath, attuning to the field of hearing, and then receiving that field, or whether it's a broader receptive awareness without choosing to ground with a particular object.

There's a blend, a way that it's helpful to explore these two together: relaxation and attention. This is another area where I found supports for the practice.

And this points to something Winnie talked about last night when she said, you're not either in the middle of a three-month retreat or at the beginning of a six-week retreat. You are here to meet this moment. So right now, just notice your hands. Notice the sound of my voice. Notice a breath. Often it's not very hard to do that for a moment. What tends to be more challenging is to sustain that over time.

And continuity is a really supportive tool for the establishment of mindfulness. We'll talk a lot about continuity. And yet again, in my own practice, I thought I needed to really grab onto the present moment and hold onto it for dear life, creating a lot of tension in that attention.

And so the practice of what Joseph sometimes says—short moments, many times—just enough effort essentially to stay present for this moment, for this in-breath. That's all the effort you need to make. You do not need to sit down and say, "I need to sit here and be present for the entire forty-five minutes." What is often helpful is to recognize, "Oh, this in-breath." And then do it again—an out-breath. And then again, an in-breath. Just enough effort for half a breath.

Another secret teaching from Joseph. He said, "I'll give you that secret teaching: just enough effort for half a breath." And then do it again, and again, and again. And notice when the mind jumps in and creates the experience of time stretching out in front of you. When the mind jumps in and says, "But that's for another six weeks, I can't..." That's a thought. That's all that is. It's a thought. And notice that thought arising.

I have an analogy that I like to use around this—short moments, many times—and that is about getting the momentum of mindfulness. This momentum will build actually in the short moments, many times. This is again part of the art of our practice: as we explore an in-breath, and again an out-breath, with enough effort to be with the in-breath, over time the momentum of mindfulness begins to build. And then it's almost like we don't have to remind ourselves—or it is that we don't have to remind ourselves as often. So we may be present for two or three breaths very easily and then need to remind ourselves. We need to start getting familiar with that experience of the mindfulness lingering for a little while and begin to notice when it starts to wobble a little bit.

The analogy I like is that of riding a scooter—those little kick scooters, not a motor scooter, that kids ride. A little two-wheeled scooter with a platform you stand on. To get the scooter going from a standstill, you need to tap on the ground: tap, tap, tap, tap. You could probably put the foot down and push really hard in the hopes that you'd go a long way, but that can create some instability for the momentum. Gentle, light taps give you the possibility to balance and get the momentum going. You get balanced and you get the momentum going with the taps, the gentle taps. Then you begin to get familiar with what it's like for that momentum to grow, and you can ride for a little while. You don't have to put your foot down. In fact, at certain points, when the momentum is going, putting your foot down will slow you down.

So you get the momentum going, and then you start to get familiar with what it's like for the scooter to get wobbly. And you put your foot down again to get the momentum back. That kind of experience around the gentle, light touch—reminding yourself, "Can I be with the in-breath? Can I be with the out-breath?"—light touch, and then beginning to get familiar with that experience perhaps of a little bit of momentum of mindfulness. And when it feels supportive, reconnect with a gentle reminder again. "Oh right, mind's starting to drift"—kind of a feeling of the attention pulling away. Bring it back, bring the attention, connect again. Light touch, many times.

And the third tool—so basically it's relax, receive. That receiving may happen in directed or receptive attention. Relax, receive. And the third one, which Greg pointed to this morning too: allow. Cultivating an allowing attention to whatever is happening in the present moment. This morning Greg used "kind

attention." We could say "loving awareness." It's an important part of our wise mindfulness, of this mindfulness that points us in the direction of freedom, because it supports the possibility of the mindfulness holding whatever is happening, of supporting the curiosity around what is the human experience of whatever is arising.

When the mind can explore and incline towards this attitude of allowing, it creates the conditions for us to be okay with whatever is happening in the present moment—which allows us to learn from it.

When we can notice and begin to recognize what's happening here in the present moment, we begin to understand the conditions that are at play in creating what's happening—the conditions that are at play in creating our reactivity, the conditions that are at play in creating mindfulness and concentration and love. And so our mind begins to understand. As the mindfulness is joined with this allowing, it creates the conditions for our minds to deeply understand itself, and to understand suffering—that first noble truth that the Buddha talked about.

Those four noble truths come with actions. Each of them comes with actions. The first is meant to be understood. And to me, this is where the whole thing begins. We cultivate this capacity of mindfulness and explore the possibility of allowing. When that is in place, when the mind can allow what is arising, it creates the conditions for that understanding of suffering.

As the mind begins to understand suffering, basically what happens there—I kind of pointed to this earlier—that thief going through the house, if that thief were looking at their own mind in that moment, they would find pain in the experience of wanting to take something from somebody else. If they could actually notice the human experience, which they probably can't because there's a lot of delusion going on for them to be in that situation, but if they could step below that layer of delusion and open to the human experience of what was actually going on there, they would find pain.

When we open, with this allowing attention, to reactive emotions, our system, our organism, basically begins to understand: this is not helpful. This is not conducive to well-being in the moment. And because of that learning—because the mind itself, it's like we don't have to consciously do that learning, we don't have to figure that out—the conditions of mindfulness and allowing support the mind, the organism, to understand that. Our mind can begin to understand that reactivity is suffering in the moment. And because of that learning, our system essentially, inherently wants to move in the direction of well-being.

Our practice of mindfulness, we could say—this mindfulness coupled with allowing—is giving our system new information. It's giving our system an education into our habits of mind, our habitual tendencies, showing us that they don't serve us in the way that we thought they did. And as the mind sees that they don't serve us, the mind itself begins to understand and begins to find its way to releasing them.

There are definitely times when consciously we can help that along. There are times when it's really supportive for us, recognizing that we're caught in a storm of anger, to turn the attention to something

else, to bring in some mettā, to use some of our tools that support us in balancing the mind there. And yet, if the mind can hold that reactivity with that experience of, "Oh, this is the human experience of anger. I can be with this. The mindfulness can be with this," then the learning is happening there already. You may not need to apply those antidotes if the mindfulness and the allowing are holding it.

And yet, of course, it's not always easy to allow. Might it be so? I wish it were so—that when I'm caught in some kind of reactive state and the mind is really caught by it, I could just say, "Oh, just allow this." Sometimes we can't do that. And so sometimes we have to hold, or step back, perhaps see if there can be a bigger container that allows the not-allowing. That allows, "Wow, there's all this anger, and I hate this." Oh, can I know that? Can I know there's anger and hate? Can I be with that? Can I allow the resistance to the anger and hate to be there and be known—to allow the not-allowing? Is it possible to create that bigger container, to step back and recognize that maybe we can allow the not-allowing?

And if that does not seem possible, that's a good time to change the channel, to turn your attention to something else, to bring in some of the tools that we know help to balance our mind when we're really caught by something.

And so... relax. May the body relax. May the mind relax. And can you, in that relaxation, recognize something of an ease of being with this moment? Maybe there's a little more possibility of knowing, "Oh, this, in the present moment"—maybe the body, maybe the breath. If you're exploring a more open awareness, just whatever's arising. If you are exploring the breath, attuning to the breath, or attuning to the body and then exploring receiving the breath. Just enough effort for this moment.

And what's here now, receiving the next moment and the next moment. Opening to the possibility of allowing your experience to be exactly as it is.

Allowing is not about agreeing or disagreeing with experience. We don't have to agree with something or like it in order to allow it. Allowing is more this sense of recognizing that what has arisen is already here. Might as well allow it, because it's already here.

And that allowing isn't necessarily about non-action, but opening to recognize that what has arisen has arisen. This creates space in the heart. That allowing creates space in the heart for—rather than reactivity being the next moment, rather than reactivity being how we meet what's here—skillful responsiveness to be how we meet it. And maybe skillful responsiveness is just holding it in that allowing. And maybe skillful responsiveness means choosing another experience to attend to.

Relax. Receive. Allow. And let the learning happen.

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