Supports for Continuity

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:13

As we've been talking about satipatthana, the establishing of mindfulness, a big part of what it means to establish mindfulness is for the mindfulness to gain some momentum. There is moment-to-moment mindfulness, and this is supported by cultivating a continuity of mindfulness.

Many of my teachers have said, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya in particular says, you practice from the moment you get up to the moment you go to bed. Practicing, establishing mindfulness with everything that we do. In the sitting, in the walking, of course, but also in what Greg used this term for this morning—the in-between, the in-betweenings. All of those moments between formal sitting and walking. As we get interested in and explore the possibility of the mindfulness carrying through those times as well, this really deepens the power of our mindfulness.

Now of course we're not going to be able to be mindful all day long, but it is a worthy aspiration, and worthy to practice with what can support this continuity of mindfulness. Continuity of mindfulness is the establishment of mindfulness. But also I understand that when mindfulness is happening moment to moment, this is a form of concentration. Ryan spoke about momentary, moment-to-moment concentration. And so really we could say that the definition of concentration is mindfulness arising in each moment, and the mind not pulled out into distraction, not pulled out into losing mindfulness, essentially.

Sometimes we cultivate that moment-to-moment mindfulness on a single object, like the breath, where we're bringing a focus of attention to one object. It becomes the more one-pointed concentration. But still, really, the definition of concentration there is the continuity of mindfulness. The thing that makes that concentration is the continuity of mindfulness.

And then there's this flavor of it that's stable on one object. There's this other flavor of it that is the stability of the awareness—an awareness that is not disturbed by whatever arises, an awareness that can meet whatever's arising without getting pulled into it, wanting to push it away, or getting confused about it. This kind of moment-to-moment concentration really begins to reveal how our minds work.

We see the impermanent nature of experience. We see the dukkha nature of experience at times. We experience the suffering of what our minds do. This, by the way, is not a mistake. When we are mindful, we see how those habits and patterns of mind operate. When we can know them—as I said in my first talk, when I saw anger as anger, just really seeing it, I felt the suffering of it. That was a little bit of a shock, to actually recognize, oh, this hurts here.

The mindfulness, cultivated moment to moment, begins to help us see the nature of our experience as impermanent, as unreliable for a place to land for lasting happiness—its dukkha nature—and its not-self nature, its conditioned nature, that things are all process, just a tumbling on of process. The seeing of that has the effect of helping the mind to let go of the ways that we cling.

The ways that we cling are typically because we attribute permanence to things, we attribute reliability to things, we attribute a sense of "I can control things," a sense of self to things. Things are mine, things are me, who I am. Those misperceptions create or participate in why we suffer. When we can see the nature of our experience through this moment-to-moment concentration, the mind begins to let go of those patterns and habits. We don't have to do the letting go. The letting go comes with the understanding. And so the power of our practice is really revealed to us with the continuity of mindfulness.

That's what I'd like to explore this evening: some supports for continuity, the moment-to-moment kind of continuity. My teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has said if we really understood the value of the practice, we would not stop practicing. So appreciating or remembering, at times even perhaps reflecting on the value of practice, can be a support for our engagement with practice. And really that's what continuity is—this engagement.

You all know the value of practice. None of you, I think, would have signed up for a retreat of this length if you did not have some sense of the value of being here for this long. And we forget. Sometimes, especially on a long retreat—it's funny. Here we are doing this thing that we've thought about for so long. We've planned and set aside our time, and it takes a lot. It takes a lot to get here. And then we get here, and over the weeks—maybe more for those of you who've been here for seven weeks already, but maybe also starting now for some of you who've been here for a week, just over a week—it may start to feel like, well, this is just what we do. We get up, we go to the hall, we sit, we walk, we eat, we sit, we walk.

It becomes like going to work. We do our job. And we forget to remember how helpful it is.

So if you find yourself almost treating the practice like a job, take a few moments—maybe at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day—to remember how the practice has served you. Connect with the aspiration and intention that brought you here. If you find at times there's a waning of energy towards the practice, remembering how it has supported you can be very helpful.

The Dalai Lama has pointed to this kind of reflection and encourages it not over short periods of time. How have you benefited from the practice—not necessarily today or yesterday, but over the arc of your practice? Look at your life.

When I think about my mind before I started practicing, I'm so glad I met the practice. My life is completely, completely transformed. And I can forget the value at times. But when I remember that, it's like, yes. I remember those moments where I saw something and thought, wow, this works. This is helpful. Or even just noticing over time the weakening of habits and patterns. Sometimes we don't see something

vanish in a moment, but we notice over time: I'm not reacting to those things as much as I used to. And we know that it is connected to our engagement with the practice.

So if you find your mind going, "Why am I doing this?"—see if you can remember that value, what you've actually experienced as value. I'm quite sure that all of you wouldn't be here without knowing something from your own direct experience of the value of practice. This can support the mind's willingness to engage. It's a form of confidence or faith in the practice.

In terms of exploring continuity of mindfulness, we often think about making effort, reminding ourselves, connecting again and again with the practice. This is one of the key ways that we engage—that light touch of effort to remember, to be connected. Just enough, as we talked about earlier in the retreat, just enough to meet this moment, and then do it again and again.

There's an analogy I find evocative for this light touch of practice, the light touch of effort. Often, in terms of engaging with effort, we come into a sitting or go out for a walking and we think, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful for the whole thing." We try to pick up all the effort to do the forty-five-minute sitting in the first few moments. "I'm going to do this." But it doesn't work that way. It really is just these small moments—moment to moment to moment.

So the analogy is this: children have these little scooters they ride on, not the motorized ones, but the ones that are just a little platform. I think they're called razor scooters. They're just a little platform and you put one foot on it, holding onto the handles. To get going, you put your foot down and you tap—tap the ground. After a while, finding your balance on those two wheels requires that gentle tapping. If you put your foot down and tried to push really hard to get fast momentum going, it would be a pretty wobbly ride. But the gentle tap, tap, tap—you can find your balance and get a little momentum.

A light tap. Touch, touch, touch. And then you start getting momentum and can ride for a little while. You bring your foot up and don't have to tap for a bit. Then you start feeling it get a little wobbly, and you know you need to put your foot down again to tap and get a little momentum. Maybe that time you just need one tap and then ride again because there's still some momentum—it's just a little wobbly.

This is very similar to how the light touch of effort works in our practice. We don't try to pick up the whole sitting at the beginning. Just enough for an in-breath. Just enough for an out-breath. Just enough for a step or two. Just enough to meet this. Just this moment. And then do it again. And do it again. A light touch. A light tapping.

The idea of "I have to do this for 45 minutes"—that's just an idea. The actual effort involved is very light. So you might notice if the mind picks up the thought "I have to keep doing this, keep doing this." It's just an idea. It's true we have to keep doing it, but the feeling of that idea and our relationship to it doesn't necessarily have to connect with the actual light touch of just this moment. Just this moment. Just this moment. Just that tap, tap, tap.

And then we start to feel the momentum of mindfulness. We start to get familiar with that quality, and we learn that perhaps we can connect with a light touch for half a breath and then find ourselves riding that for two or three breaths without needing to reconnect or prompt remembering. We begin to get the feeling of the momentum of mindfulness.

When does it become useful to connect again, to re-engage, to meet with a little intention—that intention to remember the mindfulness? A light touch of effort is so helpful, along with recognizing that momentum. We begin to get familiar with the experience of mindfulness, with what it means to be mindful. There's a feeling of being mindful.

And when there is that momentum—just as with the scooter, when there's good speed going, if you put your foot down, you're actually going to get in the way. Similarly, when there's that sense of momentum and we start checking, "Am I connected? Am I aware?"—that's actually interrupting the natural momentum of mindfulness. That's what Joseph meant when he said you don't have to try to turn the light on when it's already on. You get familiar with that sense of what it's like to be mindful.

This familiarity with what it's like to be mindful—for me this has been one of the key ways that the momentum of mindfulness has developed. I've been interested in engaging with this momentum, or the continuity of mindfulness, by getting curious about the experience of mindfulness when it's there—what it's like when it's there—and the goings, when it's not there.

Mindfulness is a quality of mind, a conditioned arising that is sometimes arising in the mind and sometimes not arising in the mind. We could call it a mental formation, a mental activity. Like concentration is a mental activity. Ease or peace or anger or confusion—all of these are mental activities. Mindfulness is one of them, one of these mental activities. And like confusion or anger or peace or ease, mindfulness is sometimes present and sometimes not present.

Getting curious about the comings and goings of mindfulness is really a kind of investigation. This investigation or curiosity about the disappearance of mindfulness and its reappearance has been a way in my own practice that mindfulness has expanded into new areas—more continuity resulting from this kind of exploration.

As opposed to thinking, when I notice that mindfulness goes, "I need to just try harder," what I did instead was get curious. What happens when mindfulness goes? Where's it going? How is it going? What's going on there? An interest to learn about those areas where there are these fallings-off of mindfulness. A curiosity to explore that. This has been a very powerful part of my practice and has greatly expanded the continuity of mindfulness.

So I want to talk about this in some depth. How do we explore the comings and goings of mindfulness, like we might explore the comings and goings of any mind state?

I've had people say to me sometimes that it feels like mindfulness is either there or it's not there. They can

see when it comes back, but they can't see when it goes away. And it is definitely easier to see when mindfulness returns. But it is also possible, as I was describing with the scooter, to get familiar with the quality of being present, that sense of the momentum of mindfulness. We start to get a sense of when it's getting a little weak, beginning to drift.

I'll start with the exploration of recognizing mindfulness returning, because that is probably the easiest place to begin to get familiar with the experience of mindfulness—what it's like when mindfulness returns. When mindfulness returns, often we have what we call, "Oh, my mind wandered."

And, you know, when we wake up, we might say we're waking up, and in that moment, often our relationship to what's happening is, "I wasn't mindful." There's frequently a relationship to that of self-denigration: "I'm not doing it right, I can't do it right."

But in that moment—when you notice that you weren't mindful—what's actually happening is that you are aware in the moment. You are mindful in the moment that mindfulness is returning. That's what has occurred. You've become aware that mindfulness has returned. But then what we tend to do with it is overlay the idea that, "Oh, I'm supposed to be able to keep the mindfulness continuous, and I wasn't doing that, so I failed somehow."

So that moment when we notice that we're back—that moment is a great moment. There are several things that are great about it. First of all, mindfulness is back, so we've got the possibility of cultivating mindfulness again. It's also a moment of mindfulness that you didn't have to do. It was free. You made no effort for that one.

If we can be curious about the moment of mindfulness returning... At one point on a retreat here, that curiosity arose: can I see the moment of mindfulness returning? Now, this isn't something I actually recommend trying to see, because it's much more that it's seen—that mindfulness, you know, we can know that. But there can be a curiosity about it: can I know that without judging it? Can I just know the arising of mindfulness? And what is it arising with?

Because usually it's arising with something potentially connected to what the mind was doing moments before. It's arising with a thought, or it's arising with an emotion, or it's arising with a sound—it's arising with some experience. So what is the experience? Mindfulness returns and there's some experience that mindfulness is knowing in that moment. But very quickly we think, "Oh, I'm supposed to be with the breath," or whatever, "and I wasn't mindful a moment before, so that's a problem." And so we miss that moment. We miss that experience of mindfulness returning.

In that moment when mindfulness returns, when we're not judging it, there's an interesting kind of distinction or recognition that's possible. When mindfulness returns, there is the awareness in this moment of what it's returning with, and there's also a lingering memory of what was happening before. Consciousness, feeling, perception—all continuing while we're not mindful. And so when mindfulness

returns, we can know something about what was happening before.

There's often a little bit of a sense of a quality of difference there in that moment when mindfulness returns. Not always, but sometimes there is a sense of, "Oh, this is what it's like to be mindful." And there's a lingering memory of what it was like a moment before, or a few moments before, when the mind was caught or tied up or not clearly knowing in the present moment.

So there's a learning, a kind of learning of the distinction. What does it feel like for that mindfulness to return? What is that experience of mindfulness returning? Getting familiar with that.

There were some periods of time where I got so interested in this—what's it like for mindfulness to return?—that I kind of just let the mind wander, almost. It didn't matter how many times the mind wandered in the sitting. If it wandered two hundred times in the sitting, that was two hundred opportunities for me to see what it was like when mindfulness returned. Getting familiar with that. Getting familiar with that moment.

Usually we cultivate mindfulness by prompting mindfulness. When mindfulness is present, we can remember to tap. We can remember to continue to practice with being mindful. And that's called prompted mindfulness. But this moment of mindfulness arising—it's conditioned, it is arising in dependence on conditions, but it's not anything that we are doing. It is arising without our participation. That is called unprompted mindfulness.

Another way we can cultivate mindfulness is by beginning to recognize the arising of unprompted mindfulness. Through the recognition of that arising moment, we are getting familiar with the experience of being mindful.

And as with any wholesome quality, when we notice it with mindfulness, it creates the conditions for that wholesome quality to arise more frequently. When we notice and bring attention to unwholesome qualities—anger, aversion, delusion—when we notice those, it creates the conditions for them to appear less often in the mind.

So this recognition of the experience of mindfulness returning seems to create the conditions for us to notice that happening more often. This is true here on retreat and also in daily life. If we're curious about noticing the moment of mindfulness returning, this is a great practice for the in-between times too.

We can cultivate a continuity. The prompting of mindfulness in the in-between times—we can prompt and encourage mindfulness using noting. A light touch of noting can help us stay prompting the mindfulness moment to moment. Stepping, stepping, reaching, touching, seeing, hearing. But it will get lost. Mindfulness will go away at times. And so the moments when mindfulness returns in the in-between times can be a great exploration. What is it? Mindfulness is arising. It's arising now. What is it arising with?

When you notice mindfulness returning, first of all, celebrate. Mindfulness is back. Notice the effortless quality of that. It gives a sense of what it means to be mindful without working very hard—that moment. It's a pointer to very easeful mindfulness, that moment of mindfulness returning, if we're not judging ourselves around it. It's also direct evidence for the not-self nature of our minds. Because who did that? Who made mindfulness come back? It happened. It was conditions, process, not self.

So notice that you're aware, mindful in the moment, and notice what is obvious in that moment. Then, once you're back, you can start prompting the mindfulness again in whatever way is useful for you—connecting with your anchor, the breath, body, hearing. Those of you who have been here longer, perhaps already with open awareness, just noticing: mindfulness returns. And then in the return of mindfulness there can be an engagement, a reconnection, the prompting of mindfulness again.

Then there's the curiosity about where mindfulness goes—the goings of mindfulness, the times our minds begin to wander. I find curiosity to be a great support for continuity of mindfulness and for this investigation. So rather than using the prompting of mindfulness, at times I will just get really curious about what the mind is doing. When is it starting to get disconnected from experience?

Often we notice certain patterns. One thing I'll suggest is just be curious about where and how you tend to lose mindfulness. You're here for long enough to really get familiar with some of these patterns. Maybe you notice you lose mindfulness when you go into your room, or when you go for a walk on the loop, or when you go to your yogi job. You might begin to notice some patterns of where mindfulness gets lost.

So noticing where you lose mindfulness, getting curious about how the mind tends to get lost, you can then begin to get curious about what happens there. Now you could say, "Okay, I get lost in my yogi job, or I get lost when I go into my room. Let me just note my way into the room"—almost brute force, just keeping the mind there. That's a way of using prompting to help us in those places where mindfulness tends to get lost, with a light touch just continuing.

For me, at least, I found it to be more fruitful in terms of learning, rather than doing that more forceful prompting of mindfulness in those zones where my mindfulness gets lost, to explore what's actually happening. Here's an example. I noticed for a while that my mindfulness got lost when I went into the restroom.

And I noticed my mindfulness would often return when I was washing my hands, finding myself gazing at myself in the mirror. That would be when I would wake up—gazing at myself in the mirror—and realize I had not noticed all of the activity in the restroom. I didn't notice that. And I didn't notice the intention to look in the mirror.

So I just began to get curious. What happens there? What is it? What goes on? As I was heading to the restroom, I'd think, "Let's see, what goes on? What is it the mind does there that it gets lost?"

In that case, I noticed that at one point I was very present with most of what was happening in the

restroom. I was washing my hands, very aware of washing my hands. And then I noticed I was looking up. I caught the looking up a little bit. There was a moment of just habit engaging—the habit of looking at myself in the mirror. I didn't see that intention. I didn't see that impulse to look up. I was just automatically looking up. It was like, "Wow, this is just a habit to look at myself in the mirror."

So that curiosity of "What happens here?"—it wasn't like some deep need to be seen or anything like that. It was just a habit. But I could see in that moment the habit arising.

This kind of exploration—taking an inventory of where your mind tends to get lost, then having some curiosity about what happens there—can be very fruitful.

We might also lose mindfulness in particular experiences, like painful body sensations. I would notice at times that a couple of different things happened when I had pain in my body. At one point I noticed that when there was pain, the mind started singing. At other times I'd notice it would just go into spacing out. It would go into some non-mindful state. I would wake up kind of singing or in this spaced-out place.

What I found interesting was this: when I noticed I was getting lost when there was pain in the body and got curious about that, I realized that when the mind was singing its song or lost in spaciness, it was not bothered by the pain. There had been a lot of aversion to the pain, and in this place where the mind went out of mindfulness, it was almost like a little lesson. When I woke up in the singing or in the spacing out, I could see that the mind was not hooked by the pain anymore. It was not disturbed by the pain in that space.

So this was a strategy. My mind had learned how to decouple from being reactive to pain, but not in a way that was keeping me aware. That was interesting to me. It was a little learning: the mind knows how not to be hooked by the pain. Can I learn from that?

I played with that. Can I not let the mind be magnetized to the pain, but not get lost? What might that mean? Again, playing with the learning around when mindfulness gets lost. What's going on there? In this case, it was a strategy my mind had developed to deal with pain. Rather than letting it do that particular strategy, I learned from it and was then able to stay present with the pain without being disturbed by it.

We also might lose awareness in very particular identified habits of mind. For me, self-hatred was a big one. We all have our own.

It might be boredom. It might be confusion. It might be depression. These are patterns of mind where we tend to identify and get pulled into them, going down the rabbit hole.

For these patterns, what I find interesting is that it's more about working with the waking up. The exploration becomes about the return of mindfulness. At some point with these very strong, powerful habits of mind—like self-hatred for me—if the mind was caught in that rabbit hole, it didn't often find its way out by itself. I would wake up deep in the rabbit hole of self-hatred. Likewise with depression. The

mind would have been lost in the depression, and I'd find myself waking up with the depression.

So that moment of mindfulness returning—it's returning with whatever state is present. Sometimes the mind is just returning from a very light kind of wander, but sometimes it will wander into these deep old habits and patterns. When that's where the mindfulness is getting lost, then I find the moment of waking up and noticing: *Oh, here's what it's like to be aware with this pattern. This is the experience of self-hatred, aware with that.*

The practice of exploring the moment of mindfulness returning can support this capacity to recognize when mindfulness returns into a deep pattern or habit of mind. What I found around anger and self-hatred was that waking up with it—just acknowledging, "Okay, yep, there it is. This is what it's like to be angry. It hurts. This is self-hatred. This is what it feels like"—that attunement on the waking up allowed the mindfulness to begin waking up with that state earlier in the process.

I might have described this before: it would wake up into full-blown anger, but over time, that attunement developed. It's like we set a kind of intention, a curiosity: *Can I know when mindfulness gets caught by this?* When we wake up into that state, in that moment of waking up, the mindfulness gets more attuned to that quality, more curious about it. And so it starts to wake up earlier and earlier in the process of that pattern, to the point where you might start to see the very beginnings of it.

This did happen for me with anger—beginning to see just the movement towards it before it was actually constructed. Seeing the mind, which felt like a freight train: "Yeah, let me jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry." But seeing that, the mind let it go.

So again, the curiosity around where mindfulness gets lost and what the mind can learn from it. Not to double down and just try to stay mindful through everything, but to be curious. Maybe this talk really could be a talk on curiosity—it's such a powerful support.

Just a couple more reflections, as I'm running out of time. I'd say one of the key ways mindfulness slips out is when there's a shift of attention and there hasn't been a clear recognition that the attention has shifted. We're sitting, paying attention to the breath. This has happened to me when I was really working with an anchor object, with the agenda to stay with the breath. With that agenda, it's like, "Yep, this is what I'm doing, this is what I'm doing." And then something happens—a sound occurs and the attention goes to the sound. It's not like we have to try to make it go; it goes to the sound. But sometimes, if we have that agenda to stay with the breath, we might not notice that shift. There's a sound, and then the mind just goes into its habitual thing around the sound. It thinks about the sound. I remember hearing the sound of a car going down Pleasant Street, and then I was driving down Pleasant Street in my mind. The mind just went down Pleasant Street, down to Barry. I didn't see that hearing had happened, didn't notice that shift of attention.

As mindfulness gets stronger, we can really notice that shift—that quality of the shift of attention. I'd say this is one of the key ways we slip into thinking. The attention shifts to some object, some experience, we

don't clearly notice that shift, and then the mind starts thinking about it.

And the last reflection I'll share is this: as the practice deepens, as there's more continuity of mindfulness, quite paradoxically it might seem, as there's a little more continuity and stability in the mind, sometimes there are transition points in our practice.

It's like we're attending to experience in a particular way, and there's a kind of familiarity. At one point on the three-month retreat, I was finding it very easy to just sit down and stay with the breath. I would just sit down, and it would be right there—the breath would be so clear. It was almost effortless; I didn't have to work very hard. This was well into the course. And then one day I sat down, and it was like the mind was just wandering.

When there's a shift as the practice is deepening, this was a time where suddenly I started losing awareness more often. At that point I had known enough to kind of just be curious. It's like, "Okay, what's going on? I know it's not like I've been going out dancing and singing and seeking entertainment. That's not why the mind is wandering. There's something going on here."

So again, the curiosity. And what I discovered is that the sensations of the breath that I was so attuned to—those were not happening anymore. The mindfulness had dropped to a subtler, really subtle level. I would notice the sensations of the breath, and then they would just be gone. And that's when the mind would wander.

There's a kind of sense of, "Okay, there's a settling here, a deeper settling that's happening." It does happen that as the mind settles, there are times when the mind starts wandering more. And when that happens for me, I get curious. Because often something new is happening, something new unfolding—a settling of the mind to a new level perhaps, an unfamiliar experience, a quieter mind. There are things that maybe we're not so familiar with seeing. And when we're not as familiar with meeting those experiences, those can be times when the mind wanders.

So again, some patience and some curiosity: "Well, what's actually happening here as the mind is starting to wander? What's actually happening?"

I really want to encourage this curiosity around noticing mindfulness—the experience of mindfulness itself and the places where we lose mindfulness. Not to judge them; it's all conditioned. All the places where we lose mindfulness are conditioned. So any exploration, any curiosity about it, is going to be revealing the conditioning of our minds.

The exploration with curiosity also—like for instance in those explorations around mindfulness slipping as the practice deepens—there were times when I would just notice, like I would sit down and think, "Okay, I'm with the breath, I'm with the breath," and it's gone. It's like, "Okay, let's just see what happens as it goes." Rather than trying to stay with the breath, it's like, "It's slipping. How is it slipping?"

That practice, that willingness to be curious about where the slipperiness is, what that edge is—it has created the conditions for mindfulness to begin to see way more than I would have ever thought it could. Mindfulness can meet anything. Any idea you have about spacey mind being inherently a state that's non-mindful—it's just a state that's habitually non-mindful. We can be aware within that state. So some curiosity, some exploring the edges of mindfulness.

I might have said this the other day: if we're holding to what we already know, if we're looking for experience or trying to stay with what we know, we don't see what we don't know. And so this is kind of an exploration of willingness. Like, "Okay, mindfulness and wisdom are interested in something. And I don't know what that is. So let's see. Can I stay with them? Can I follow where mindfulness and wisdom are going?"

This has been a very powerful practice for me in terms of strengthening the continuity of mindfulness.

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