Ordinary

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 46:42

When we come to meditation, sometimes we're looking for something special—bliss, joy, lovely light, golden experiences. And those things happen from time to time. But what I'd like to talk about today is kind of the opposite side of things: the ordinary, and how that ordinary can be the ground of our freedom.

I'd like to start by talking about mindfulness, which is itself a pretty ordinary quality of mind. As we've defined it, it's basically the ability of the mind to know what's happening while it's happening. It's just a basic quality of our minds. It's nothing esoteric, nothing particularly special. And it's actually recognized—it can be recognized when it's pointed out to us—but we don't consciously recognize it that often. It's like it happens to us and it's not something we've noted or paid attention to too much. So we've kind of missed it. But then when somebody points it out to us, it's like, oh yeah, I know what that is.

As an analogy around this: there are things that we experience a lot that we don't really necessarily connect with. I was having a conversation with a friend of mine one morning and I was saying, you know the sound of the mourning doves when they fly away? And she said, no, I don't know that sound. I said, oh no, you know that sound. You've heard it a hundred times. The next time you ride your bike down the road and you see mourning doves there, listen to the sound and see if you recognize it. The next day she came back to me and she said, I do know that sound. I've heard it hundreds of times. She just really hadn't connected it with the experience or with the mourning doves.

So mindfulness can be like that for us. It's actually pretty familiar to us once we start recognizing it. It actually happens to us a lot throughout the day—little small moments of it. For little split seconds we come into mindfulness and we know what's happening while it's happening. But what we typically do with that moment, when mindfulness comes into being for a split second, is that we do something with it. We act on what we've known in that moment. And we lose the possibility then of recognizing that mindfulness has come into being. Because we immediately—that's what we've actually been trained to do in our lives. You notice something, you do something with it. Or you think about it. Or you figure it out. As opposed to recognizing that the quality of mindfulness has appeared.

And why would we bother with that? It's far more important to know that we've seen a bug on the floor and to pick it up and take it out of the hall. Why would we notice that we've become mindful? So we rarely actually notice this quality of mindfulness until someone points it out and says, hey, this is important. This is a useful quality.

The Buddha did that for us. He really recognized the value of this quality of mindfulness—this ordinary quality of mind, just a natural part of how our minds work, a natural function of our consciousness. That

it has this capacity to know what's happening while it's happening. I really think it was brilliant of the Buddha to recognize the value of this quality. It's such an unassuming quality. And when it just functions in the way we normally function with it, it doesn't seem very important at all, really. It was the brilliance of the Buddha to recognize that this quality, when cultivated and developed, is really powerful.

So it's worth getting to know what it feels like to be mindful. It's worth getting to know the quality of mindfulness really well.

There's an interesting teaching about mindfulness that when I first heard it I thought, how does that work? This doesn't make any sense. And this teaching is that the proximate cause of mindfulness is mindfulness. So how does that work? Partly it works because there are kind of two different ways mindfulness happens. There's one kind that's called unprompted mindfulness. And this is the kind of mindfulness that arises spontaneously when you're lost in thought and you return to mindfulness.

That moment when you return to mindfulness—that moment is unprompted mindfulness. Prompted mindfulness, on the other hand, is when you are already mindful and reminding yourself to be mindful.

So you can perhaps see how mindfulness is the proximate cause of mindfulness: it takes that unprompted mindfulness, and then, recognizing it, prompts additional moments of mindfulness. From this perspective, getting familiar with what these unprompted moments feel like, really appreciating these unprompted moments of mindfulness, is immensely helpful. It's really valuable, because that's where it begins. That's where our practice begins.

I'd like to speak for a while about what it feels like to be mindful. I'd like to propose that it's really useful to get familiar with this feeling, because when we do, those spontaneous moments of mindfulness that just happen to us—those unprompted moments—start to point themselves out to us, instead of us immediately slipping past them in order to do something with what we've noticed. As we get familiar with this feeling of mindfulness, we actually start to recognize that it happens to us far more than we thought it did.

In my own experience, I found that one of the best places to explore what mindfulness feels like was this very moment of returning. When I first started meditating, teachers would get up on the podium and say, "Feel a sense of presence. Feel a sense of presence in your experience." And I thought, what are they talking about? I had no clue what it meant to feel a sense of presence. This knowing of presence, having a sense of what it's like to be aware, was pretty obscure to me.

But then one time Joseph Goldstein said, "Get familiar with the difference between what it's like to be aware and what it's like to not be aware." And I thought, well, how do you do that? How do you know what it's like to not be aware? But then I started looking at my experience, and I discovered this moment of remembering—the moment when we remember about mindfulness, when mindfulness returns spontaneously, the unprompted moments of mindfulness. In that moment, the awareness that has come into being and the unawareness are in pretty close proximity. The mind, as it comes into awareness, has a

kind of memory. It remembers. There's a lingering flavor of what it felt like to not be aware.

So I began exploring that moment. I began exploring that moment of coming back into awareness, which I have mentioned as being an important moment to recognize. And here's another reason why it's so important: first of all, because you're mindful—you're already mindful in that moment that you've remembered. Whatever you've woken up into, you're already mindful. It's important because it can begin to give you a sense of the difference between being awake and aware versus being lost in thought. In that moment, there can be the beginning of a recognition of what mindfulness feels like. At least for me, this was a very important exploration—starting to get familiar with that moment, seeing if I could kind of contrast it. And this wasn't a lot of doing; it's more like simply asking, what does it feel like now to be aware? And at the same time, within that awareness, there is a kind of automatic lingering memory of what it was like before, when the mind was dull, foggy, lost in thought.

In this way, by exploring that moment, my mind began to educate itself around what awareness feels like, what it feels like to be present, what it feels like to be awake. This can happen not only in our sitting practice, although sitting is a great place to explore this.

Another reason why this moment is so important is because it is unprompted mindfulness. It takes no effort whatsoever for that moment of mindfulness to appear. Prompted mindfulness, on the other hand, requires some effort. But that moment of unprompted mindfulness, just arising spontaneously—it's effortless. You didn't have to do a thing to have it happen. And as you begin to touch into that moment, you get a sense of the natural quality, the possibility of a very natural awareness that doesn't take any effort at all. So again, that's another reason why this moment is so helpful to get familiar with: it reveals the natural quality of awareness, of mindfulness, and the possibility for natural awareness.

When we start prompting mindfulness—and it is necessary to prompt it, necessary to remind ourselves to be mindful in order to cultivate mindfulness—our agendas start getting in the way. And so this moment when we spontaneously come into mindfulness from being lost in thought is a real pointer to what mindfulness can feel like, what a very natural mindfulness can feel like.

Unfortunately, in that moment, we usually immediately start beating ourselves up because we have been lost in thought, and we lose our opportunity for these explorations. For myself, when I really started inquiring into this moment, it really cut into that judging mind. Anytime my mind got lost in thought and I woke up again: "Oh good, here's another opportunity to see this effortless mindfulness."

I offer this to you as an exploration.

We can also notice this phenomenon in the midst of our daily activities—just walking around, in the dining hall. This falls more into the informal areas of meditation. We have our formal practice time of sitting and walking, and our informal practice times. During the informal times, our goal is to be mindful all day long, but it seems to me, in my own experience and in talking to people, that when we're at meals,

when we're going to our rooms, when we're putting on our shoes, we tend to be a little less intentional around the practice. It can be a little less fruitful in a way.

This is why we suggest the bells at two o'clock and at six-thirty, to kind of delineate these informal times from the formal times. It's not that we're really taking a break during the informal times, but something about the intentionality of formal practice supports the cultivation of these qualities.

Yet in our informal practice times, we actually get more opportunity to recognize this moment of waking up, precisely because we're not being so intentional about putting the effort in. So use that time as a time to explore this moment of remembering. This moment of, "Oh, I'm reaching for a glass and I'm noticing my arm just kind of magically moving through the air." You don't have to stop. You don't have to do a thing. You just notice mindfulness has arisen and you're noticing what's happening, kind of without missing a beat. The mindfulness just automatically lands on what's happening. It's like a light comes on.

See if you can get familiar with what this feels like.

Now I do have to say that in the initial explorations, it's not going to feel like a light comes on—not quite like that, probably. There seems to be this lag between mindfulness returning and our recognizing consciously that mindfulness has returned. It's kind of like coming out of the mud.

The way I understand it from the Abhidhamma perspective, in terms of how the mind functions, the mind is set to function in all these very small moments of experience. A mind moment can either be mindful or not mindful. And mind moments are really, really tiny—like seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye, or some fantastic number like that. Really, really tiny, these mind moments.

In any single mind moment, you can be mindful or not mindful. So it's kind of like mindfulness returns for a mind moment or two, and then it's not there for fifty mind moments, and then it's there for a moment or two, and then it's not there. It takes enough mind moments of mindfulness before we recognize it consciously. Something like that—it's my own model of it.

So it feels like we're coming out of the mud, and initially it may be that it's not quite such a clear distinction between awareness and non-awareness. But just keep playing with it. My exploration around this was: What's the earliest I can recognize that I'm back?

When we leap on and start judging, that's when you've become mindful—you've become mindful enough to know that you're back—but then you start judging, and so you've lost the mindfulness again. Part of the exploration is around really letting go of that judgment so you can just meet that moment of effortless mindfulness as it returns. This moment happens to all of us all the time. It's a great place to explore.

As we get familiar with what it feels like—what this ordinary quality of mindfulness feels like, what it feels like to be awake—we begin to appreciate the value of mindfulness. Its value becomes more clear to us. Partly because in the moment of mindfulness coming back, when there's enough of it, mindfulness

naturally opposes greed, aversion, and delusion. As we start to see that, we really recognize clearly how valuable it is to be mindful.

That's something about the ordinariness of mindfulness, and yet how amazing it is when we recognize it, how valuable it is. It's ordinary but really valuable. It's ordinary, but the key to our liberation.

And then there's the experience that mindfulness meets. There's seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, things going through the mind, emotions, thoughts. All of our experience can be understood as coming through what are called the six sense doors—which include the five usual sense bases of seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and the sense base of the mind. Everything we experience comes through one of these sense doors. That's all that's happening. All that's happening to us all day long. Pretty ordinary.

We happen to like certain configurations of those six things better than other configurations of those six things.

We like the configuration that contains bliss far better than we like the configuration that contains pain. And we tend to think that the configuration containing ordinary seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching is somehow unimportant.

But for the purposes of mindfulness, for the purposes of waking up, for the purposes of liberation, it makes no difference what's going on in those six sense spaces. The important quality is to be aware of what is going on in those six sense spaces. It does not matter what we are paying attention to. It really does not matter.

So from this perspective, ordinary experience—the ordinariness of walking through the woods or going to the grocery store—is the ground for our waking up.

This reminds me of a story from sitting with Sayadaw U Tejaniya. There was one time in one of our group interviews where one of the people in our group was a monk, and he had gone off to the Shwedagon Pagoda one day to circumambulate and meditate there. It's a beautiful place in Rangoon. He came back and was saying how great it was: "I really recommend going to Shwedagon. It was fabulous—such wonderful mindfulness I had there. My mindfulness was clear and I was meditating all day. It was just so clear."

Sayadaw U Tejaniya's response was: "Shwedagon is a good place to be mindful. So is the supermarket."

No difference. Doesn't matter.

The Buddha pointed to this. There's a sutta I'll read to you called "The Roots of Everything." He says: "All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness, their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. All things merge in the deathless and Nibbana is their

culmination."

Nibbana meaning freedom, liberation. That's all things he's talking about. It's not just states of bliss that merge in liberation—all things. There's no part of our normal everyday experience that is not worth paying attention to. The very ordinariness of our experience can be the place where we wake up.

Meeting these experiences at the six sense bases—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching—we start to see, with mindfulness becoming continuous, that the whole show is a process. It's just a flow of changing causes and conditions. Seeing appears and disappears, hearing appears and disappears. It's just a flow of phenomena.

Munindra, one of our teacher's teachers, had this phrase: "Empty phenomena rolling on." Just seeing, just hearing, just smelling, just tasting, just things in the mind rolling on. We see the impersonal nature of this. It doesn't have to be special seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. Any seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching will do to point out this impersonal nature of our experience.

And this recognition of the impersonal nature of our experience—that it is just a process, that there's no one particularly here doing anything—this recognition really begins to free us. Because our suffering, the way that we struggle, is all bound up with there being someone who suffers.

This teaching on not-self, which I'm not going to talk about much today—one could talk about it for weeks—but I will say one thing. When I first heard about it, it felt like a foreign concept. It sounded strange, and it sounded kind of scary. No self? Who's doing anything? It felt threatening, in a way, to hear about this teaching.

And then on one three-month retreat, I began to have my first taste of seeing just the process of life unfolding—touching into that sense that there's no one here doing anything, it's just happening. That experience was a relief.

It was not threatening. It was not scary. It was a huge relief. It came as a kind of surprise to me that this thing, this idea I had in my mind—this "not self" thing that sounded like it was going to be so scary to meet—turned out to be such a relief. I came back and reported this to one of my teachers, and he quoted what I think is a Zen saying: "No self, no problem."

Through our sense doors, every experience we have has two sides to it. There's the thing that we know—the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the touch, the thought, the emotion. And there's the knowing quality. There's the thing and the knowing of it. The sight and the knowing of it. The smell and the knowing of it. Every experience has that. Whether or not we're mindful, there is this knowing quality. It's called consciousness in the Buddhist psychology. So every sense experience has this consciousness to it.

It's usually easier for us to be mindful of the thing—the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the

touch—than it is to be aware of or familiar with the knowing aspect. But it can be helpful to start getting familiar with this knowing aspect. Because this knowing quality, basically one of its functions, one of the functions of the mind, is just to know things. That's its job. It just takes things in and it knows them. It doesn't care what it knows. It doesn't have any opinions or views about what it knows. It just knows. That's its job. And so, kind of inherently embedded in this quality of knowing is non-judgment, acceptance, clarity. Starting to get familiar with this knowing aspect of our experience begins to connect us with some of these qualities that it embodies.

So how do we learn to touch into this knowing quality? It's not obvious. It's even less obvious than mindfulness, than being aware of mindfulness. There are a few things I can say about this. It's kind of indirect in a way. We know the knowing because it knows something.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya said one day, "I've been trying to think of a good analogy about knowing, how we see the knowing." He said it's kind of like wearing glasses and looking through glasses. Those of you who wear glasses—this will perhaps be a visceral experience. Usually when we have our glasses on, we're looking at the world. We're not so aware of the glasses; we're aware of what we're seeing. But the whole way we're able to see is because of the glasses. And we can kind of get a sense that the glasses are there. We take them off and we see, "Wow, can't see a thing." Then we can see. So we can begin to infer what the glasses are through how they function. It's kind of like that with the knowing. We get familiar with it through what it does, through the process that it engages with.

So here are a few ways to start teasing your way through those two pieces—the thing and the knowing of it. For me, the first place I began to be aware of this difference between these two was when I was experiencing something difficult. This happened on one self-retreat I did, and I was experiencing aversion. I was hanging out, paying attention to the aversion, noticing the unpleasantness of the aversion. At some point I realized that there were two things going on in my mind. There was the aversion and there was the knowing of the aversion. I began kind of exploring through using the noting practice—this was using the noting practice—"Aversion is known. Knowing aversion." When I inclined my mind in that way, toward the knowing of the aversion, the experience became neutral. It was no longer unpleasant, because knowing is neutral.

It is inherently neutral.

For me, this exploration has been particularly valuable when something is difficult or challenging—when there's a difficult state of mind. If you can be with it, if you can hang out with it without too much resistance, just hanging out with aversion or hanging out with unpleasant pain, if you can remain without reactivity, just being present with that... In that space, if you can incline your mind towards what does it mean to know aversion, you might get a flavor of the neutrality of the knowing. It was quite interesting—like flipping a switch. I could go back and forth: aversion, unpleasant; knowing aversion, neutral.

So that's one way to explore this quality of knowing.

Another approach is through the question "Am I aware?"—the question that Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends. He suggests, "Am I aware? What am I aware of?" Those two questions reflect the knowing and the object. The orientation toward asking "Am I aware?" orients us toward recognizing what awareness actually is. So in asking that question, don't just jump over it. Hang out for a moment. Am I aware? What is the obvious experience there? Don't try to figure it out. This is not something to think through. But with this exploration over time, it may start to become clear to you what the difference is between "Am I aware?" and "What am I aware of?"

Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggested something helpful when I was saying I had trouble distinguishing between the knowing and the object. It wasn't clear to me; it was hard to place my mind in just knowing any experience. He said, "Well, you don't try to do that." This is again something he says over and over: the things I tell you aren't something to do. We hear what he says, we go off and try to do them. He said, "Just notice when your mind is paying attention to the object and when it's paying attention to the knowing."

Now, until you start to get familiar with the knowing a little bit, that's going to be not so easy to recognize. But the mind kind of naturally does both. From time to time it lands on the object and knows the qualities of the object—it knows the hardness, the pressure, the heat, the tension, the coolness. It knows the pitch and tone of sound. It knows the color and form of seeing. And from time to time, it becomes aware of the knowing of the object. The mind will do that. So it's really about attuning yourself to what the mind is already recognizing.

That's a little more subtle.

Another place to check into this is when your experience is really, really ordinary. You're brushing your teeth, you're putting your shoes on. It's like, what is there to pay attention to here? We can dive into trying to feel the pressure and tension and tightness; we can dive into the objects. But in times when experience is pretty neutral, that's actually an interesting moment to ask yourself, "What does it feel like to be aware of this?" When we're caught in something difficult, sometimes it can be hard to ask that question. When things are really blissful, we don't want to ask that question. But when things are neutral—just walking through the woods, or scooping out your rice, or brushing your teeth, or lying down in your bed—what does it feel like to be aware of this?

Now, don't try to figure out what that knowing feels like. This is just a question to prompt the mind to explore a little bit, but it's not something to think about. The use of questions is kind of an art form in a way—just dropping that question into the pool and seeing what the ripple effects are. Drop the question: What is it like to be aware of this? It may be that your experience points out to you what awareness is. Maybe not. But you can explore that.

A kind of state of mind that I stumbled into on one three-month retreat some years ago.

In my previous retreats, I had been really focusing on very detailed mindfulness in the Mahasi style, which tends to create certain mind states. It tends to create very precise awareness of arising and passing, of just little particles of experience. And I thought that's what mindfulness was—that's what it meant to be mindful, to get down to where you could see every single moment of reticulated experience as you move your hand.

On this particular retreat, I couldn't do sitting meditation anymore because of a problem with my back, and I couldn't do slow walking anymore for the same reason. So I was walking fast and doing lying meditation, and the Mahasi style didn't work very well. I found myself doing a completely different style, a much more open, relaxed style of practice. I hadn't met Tejaniya yet, but I was doing a style very much like what he teaches.

I began stumbling into this state of mind that was just present, alert, clear—but completely ordinary consciousness. It was quite interesting to me. I didn't know I could be completely mindful and have perception and consciousness feel just ordinary. It was completely ordinary, and yet it felt extraordinary.

The reason it felt extraordinary is because there's a continuity of mindfulness happening, a continuity that allows the clarity of connecting with just whatever you're paying attention to. In that case, it was simply walking through the woods or going up the stairs—completely ordinary perception. Just knowing I'm walking up the stairs, walking up the stairs, knowing I'm walking up the stairs. Walking in the woods, knowing I'm walking in the woods. It wasn't a detailed, precise mindfulness. It was completely clear. Just ordinary. Very ordinary.

I began calling it "ordinary mind" for myself, and have since learned that this is how the Tibetans describe a state of very clear mindful awareness—ordinary mind. I think the reason it feels extraordinary is because there is that continuity of mindfulness. Continuity of mindfulness means that greed, aversion, and delusion have fallen away. In that state, there's a kind of concentration called the bliss of seclusion—the bliss of being secluded from the hindrances, from reactivity. It feels quite good.

This ordinary state of mind is a place where we can live from. That reticulated mindfulness—you can't live in that space. You can't drive down the freeway with things breaking into bits. But this state of ordinary clear awareness you can engage in the world with. And the qualities of knowing become apparent in that state: non-judgmental, accepting, clear, brilliant. The Buddha used words like radiant and luminous to describe the mind.

There's a Tibetan poet I'd like to share with you. He really celebrates this—a lot of what I've been talking about. He celebrates the ordinariness, the spontaneity, the ease with which we can connect with experience. Many of you have heard this, I'm sure. I've heard it hundreds of times, and I never get tired of hearing it.

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already present in open relaxation and

letting go.

Don't strain yourself. There's nothing to do or undo. Whatever momentarily arises in the body-mind has no real importance at all, has little reality whatsoever. Why identify with and become attached to it, passing judgment upon it and ourselves?

Far better to let the entire game happen on its own, springing up and falling back like waves, without changing or manipulating anything. And notice how everything vanishes and reappears magically, again and again, time without end.

Only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it. It's like a vivid rainbow which you pursue without ever catching, or a dog chasing its own tail.

Although peace and happiness do not exist as an actual thing or place, it is always available and accompanies you every instant.

Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences. They're like today's ephemeral weather, like rainbows in the sky.

Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you open and relax this tight fist of grasping, infinite space is there—open, inviting, and comfortable.

Make use of this spaciousness, this freedom and natural ease. Don't search any further looking for the great awakened elephant who's already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth.

Nothing to do or undo, nothing to force, nothing to want, and nothing missing.

Marvelous. Everything happens by itself.

Let's sit for just a moment.

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