The Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:03:17

In my own practice, I found it really helpful to explore patterns or habits of mind that happened to me over and over again. This exploration of a pattern gives us a lot of information about our minds. Each time that pattern happens to us, if we can bring mindfulness to it, it's like we get a different perspective on that pattern. We may see different ways that it comes into being, different ways that it arises, different aspects of our mind that hold it into place, that keep the pattern going, and different ways that it can fall apart. So each time we see a pattern, we get a little bit more information about how our minds work around that pattern or habit.

We all have our own patterns and habits. Some of us will have patterns of anger. Some of us will have patterns of greed, patterns of loneliness or self-hatred. And there's one pattern—at least one—that we all share: the pattern of the wandering mind.

We experience this pattern a lot in our practice. In experiencing it, it's not something we often think of exploring so much in and of itself as a pattern, a phenomenon that might be interesting to watch or observe or get to know. We typically think of it as something that is wrong with our meditation, that we need to get back to being present, get back to the work of being present.

So I'd like to explore with you tonight ways that I have explored the wandering mind, some of the ways that it's helpful for us, some of the reasons it's helpful for us to explore this, what we can learn about ourselves and our minds, and how we can engage with this. I find it actually quite an interesting phenomenon. It happens in so many different ways. The wandering mind itself is not just one kind of phenomenon. There are so many different ways that it happens.

We usually use this term for an experience where we kind of lose touch with present moment experience. We often use the phrase "the mind wanders out of the present moment." This wandering out of the present moment may happen just as a kind of drifting off. This happens particularly as the retreat moves on. At this point in the retreat there's more of this particular kind of wandering where there's just a little bit of low energy and the mind is not quite connected with experience. The mind just kind of drifts off. Some thought has come up into our mind and the mind just drifts off into thinking about that. There's not particularly a charge or any kind of emotional response to that. It's just a drifting. It may not even be thinking about things you know about or care about. Some of you have seen thoughts like that—you find yourself thinking about people you don't know, talking about things you don't care about. Why does the mind do this? This is kind of a low energy phenomenon.

It can manifest too as daydreaming, just images, almost like you're dreaming awake. Or it might even

happen as kind of a spacing out—not so much actively thinking, but the mind has lost touch with the present moment and is just in some kind of spaced out state without much thinking. That also can be a kind of wandering. We'll wake up into this space of, "Wow, I was just kind of zoned out there, but there wasn't a lot of thought happening."

And then there are also the familiar kinds of wanderings where it's not so much a wander out of the present moment, it's more like a charge out of the present moment. We leap onto a thought, or an emotion comes up and there's a lot of charge. Maybe call this a mind storm. It's kind of driven by greed or aversion or delusion, some kind of strong emotion fueling the thoughts. Or there might be not so much an emotional charge out of the present moment, but just a kind of reflection. We get caught by our reflections. We get caught by some thought of the past or some thought of the future or even some thought of the present moment, describing what is happening right now.

The general quality of the wandering mind across all these different kinds of wanderings—one thing they kind of have in common is it's basically a state of low mindfulness or non-mindfulness. That's actually what's going on in this experience. The term "wandering mind" is perhaps not quite the best description because that's not what's actually happening. The mind actually doesn't wander anywhere. What happens is that mindfulness disappears, gets lost, and in that space the mind does other things. That's what we call the wandering—basically the non-arising of mindfulness.

or the infrequent arising of mindfulness.

In this space of wandering mind, when the mind has wandered off and there's very little mindfulness or no mindfulness, there's not much we can do about it. We can't make ourselves come out of that wandering mind. We cannot make mindfulness re-arise as an act of will when there is no mindfulness. There's one teaching that mindfulness is the proximate cause of mindfulness. So how does that work? Partly because mindfulness arises spontaneously from time to time. And that's just what happens when we come out of a wandering mind—mindfulness arises spontaneously. When mindfulness has arisen, then we can connect with it and cultivate it actively. So when mindfulness re-arises, we can respond.

We can notice what happens in the moment when mindfulness returns. We can be aware of what the mind is waking up into. We've said this a lot: this is actually a key to our practice, this moment of coming into mindfulness after having been lost in thought. And our relationship to that moment is important—to not have a judgmental relationship, but just to recognize that in that moment mindfulness has returned. What's happening? What is mindfulness aware of as it returns into being? That's one of the ways we commonly recognize the fact of the wandering mind.

There's another way that we wake up from that wandering. At least I've seen this at times, particularly when I'm on a longer retreat like this one. This kind of waking up happens to me a little more: the mind wanders back into the present moment. It's as if you're present, then the mind wanders out of the present moment, and then it wanders back. You've been paying attention to the breathing, the mind wanders off,

thinks about something, wanders back, connects with the breathing, and then you recognize that you're breathing. There's a recognition or a memory: wait a minute, I was thinking a minute ago, but I didn't see the mind come back into this. I just remember coming back into this breath. Sometimes it can wander back behind our backs somehow. We just find ourselves back and paying attention to the breathing, but we recall that the mind had wandered.

This is interesting to notice if you can recognize it. If you notice that, the thing to recognize or do with it is basically that you're noticing remembering. You're remembering that the mind wandered. That's what the mind is doing in that moment when it recognizes that it's remembering.

There's a lot we can understand about our minds by observing this pattern of the wandering mind. The most obvious thing we can learn or understand about ourselves is some of our personal patterns—how we get caught, what we get caught on, the kinds of themes that our mind habitually gets hooked to. Through recognizing over and over again the moment of waking up and acknowledging what we're waking up into, we can begin to see and get familiar with some themes. I think it's Jack Kornfield who talks about the top ten thought patterns that we have—we all have our favorite kinds of ways that our mind gets hooked into thought. Part of this exploration is to begin to see: how does our mind get hooked? What does it get hooked to? This is learning about our personal patterns, one of the things we can learn by exploring the wandering mind.

Another thing we can begin to explore or learn with the wandering mind is that our mind is out of control. We sit down to meditate with the plan, the intention to be present, and we find that our mind wanders. Why does that happen? If we're sitting down with the intention for presence, what is it that sweeps us off? Habits sweep us away. Causes and conditions sweep us away. We have very little control over the fact that our minds wander.

There is a little bit of control in the wandering itself, a little way we can begin to explore how our minds wander out of the present moment and connect to that losing touch. I'll talk about that more in just a moment. So there's a tiny little bit of control there. It's not that we have control—it is that the processes of mind have choice. The processes of mind have choice about whether mindfulness will continue or mindfulness will let go and we get lost. There's a tiny little bit of choice that the mind has in that place.

But once the mind is lost, we have no control over how long it wanders or when we'll come back. We don't have any control over when mindfulness will re-arise. And instead of thinking of this as a problem, I find it interesting to recognize that this is actually pointing to a very deep truth—that out-of-control nature of our minds.

The Buddha talked about this out-of-control nature of the mind as pointing to the teaching on anattā, on not-self. In the second discourse that the Buddha gave, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, he mentioned this quality of being out of control with respect to the five aggregates. He said: consciousness, perception, feeling, volitional formations, and form are not self. I'm going to express this teaching from the

perspective of consciousness, because this is really the exploration I find around the wandering mind—an exploration of consciousness.

Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, it would not lead itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus." But precisely because consciousness is not self, it lends itself to disease. It is not possible to say, "Let my consciousness be thus."

So how many of you would, if you could, say "Let my consciousness be thus"? We can't do it. It doesn't work that way.

We usually see our experience in terms of the sense of self—the sense of I, me, mine—in subtle and obvious ways. Because we have this belief, and it's there until you're fully enlightened, this feeling of "I am." The sense of "I am" is said to be one of the last things to go when one is fully enlightened, so it will be with us for a while. But the belief, the view of self, is something a little more gross. The sense of "I am" is a subtle experience, but this belief in identity—the identity view, the sakkāyadiṭṭhi—we also tend to operate a lot from this belief.

Because we have this belief, it operates kind of under the surface for us. It filters our perception in much the way that states of mind filter our experience. If we have a state of anger coming up, we tend to see things through that filter of anger. Because we have this belief of self, we tend to filter things through that belief. This is one of the key delusions in our minds—this belief in self, this sakkāyadiṭṭhi.

And because it's there, we tend to experience the world in ways that confirm that belief. We notice things that confirm this self-view. We don't particularly notice things that don't confirm it. Or if we notice things that don't confirm it, we just don't connect the dots—that this thing doesn't confirm the belief in self. So it's very hard for us to take in evidence for not-self.

I'd like to suggest that the wandering mind is just such a piece of evidence. We see this over and over and over, but we don't really connect the dots and see how this is pointing to not-self.

Another aspect of this exploration of the wandering mind is related to an exploration of not-self. In exploring the experience of the wandering mind—and any experience that we have, this is not about just the wandering mind—we begin to see the cause-and-effect nature of our experience. Seeing that cause-and-effect nature begins to undermine our belief in our sense of self, because we see that things are just unfolding as causes and conditions, cause and effect, this process of being in flux. That's more evidence for not-self.

The Buddha also pointed to this recognition of cause and effect as being an avenue to explore that will help us understand this teaching. In one teaching, he was talking about this cause-and-effect nature of our experience to one of his monks. This monk was asking him about these experiences. I'm just going to jump into the middle of the dialogue.

The Buddha is saying: "With the six sense bases as condition, contact comes to be." So with the six sense bases—our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and the mind—with these six sense bases as condition, there's contact. Something meets our senses. "With contact as condition, feeling comes to be."

And the monk he's talking to jumps in here and says, "Venerable sir, who feels?"

The Buddha says, "Not a valid question. I do not say one feels."

If I should say one feels, in that case, this would be a valid question. But I do not speak thus. If one should ask me, 'Venerable sir, with what as condition does feeling come to be?' this would be a valid question. To this the valid answer is: with contact as condition, feeling comes to be. With feeling as condition, craving comes to be.

And this monk, not quite getting it, then says, "Venerable sir, who craves?"

So we also have this sense. It's not an uncommon experience to have the sense of who is it that feels, who is it that craves. And the Buddha points us to looking at experience through this cause and effect process that unfolds as a way to begin to understand. There isn't necessarily one who feels. It's a process that feels. Feeling comes to be on the basis of contact.

Through this exploration of the wandering mind, we can see, we begin to see some of the cause and effect nature of our experience. Through exploring the wandering mind, we can start to see something about our minds, our own personal processes, the personal ways we get caught, our patterns, our habits. We get to see and explore the out of control nature of our mind, the cause and effect nature of experience. And we can also begin to understand awareness itself, mindfulness itself, through exploring the wandering mind. We can begin to recognize how it feels to be aware, to be mindful. What are some of the qualities of the mind that is aware, the mind that is mindful? We begin understanding this as a process.

So I'd like to talk about how to explore this. What are ways to look at it? I'd like to talk a little bit about how I've done this in my own practice.

The easiest place to begin this exploration, at least in my own experience, is in the moment when we wake up, the moment when we remember about mindfulness. As I said a little earlier, developing a skillful relationship with this moment is key for us. And I think most of you—all of you are reporting a much less judgmental relationship with that moment. Over the course of the retreat, it tends to be much easier to wake up and to recognize, "Oh, here I am again," and not have it be such a big deal. It's just like, "Oh yeah, here I am. I'm back. Here's what's happening."

Exploration of this moment of mindfulness re-arising has been key in my own practice. Once the judgment has fallen away, I've been able to get interested in this actual re-arising of mindfulness, taking an interest in that moment of mindfulness coming back. What is it about? How does it feel?

One of the most interesting things about it that I find is that since it is a spontaneous re-arising of

mindfulness, it's effortless—pure mindfulness, spontaneous mindfulness. Connecting with that moment of mindfulness returning is not something you have to do. It's completely effortless in that moment. So it's a pointer. That moment of waking up is a pointer to a kind of ease that can happen with mindfulness.

It doesn't last for long, that ease. We do tend to have to pick up on that moment and then prompt a little bit. This moment of arising mindfulness, a spontaneous moment of arising mindfulness, we could call unprompted mindfulness. It just happens. Causes and conditions have come together to make it happen. And then we can connect with that moment and continue to cultivate the continuity of the mindfulness.

One thing that's interesting to play with—I find interesting to play with in that moment—is getting a sense of that ease of mindfulness and noticing how long it will last.

There's an analogy that I like to use about this prompted and unprompted mindfulness, about getting familiar with this feeling of mindfulness coming back. It's the analogy of using one of those scooters, those little scooters that kids use, those thin things that you put your foot on and you have to tap on the ground to get your momentum up—not a motorized scooter, but one that you actually have to use your foot with.

In working with the scooter, you have to tap on the ground quite a few times initially to get it going. And then after a while, once the scooter is moving, you can get a sense that you don't have to tap as frequently. You get a sense of the balance, the momentum of the scooter, and you notice when it gets a little wobbly and you need to put your foot down again.

We can have a similar feeling about this quality of mindfulness—that we can get familiar with the feeling of mindfulness itself and get a sense of when we need to reconnect, re-engage, remind ourselves again to be mindful.

In this moment of waking up, we can get a sense of riding that wave of easy mindfulness, that effortless mindfulness. Over time, we develop a feel for when we need to remind ourselves again. We don't necessarily have to jump on that moment, saying, "Oh, mindfulness! I've got to be mindful!" and trying somehow to hold it and grab it. We can begin to get a sense of how much momentum the moments of mindfulness have.

In working with this moment of waking up—not only the recognition of mindfulness and the effortless quality that it has—it's helpful to notice what we wake up *into*. This is one of the main instructions we give about waking up into the wandering mind: mindfulness has re-arisen. What is it aware of in that moment? Often it's thought—planning, thinking, remembering, judging, arguing, describing, fantasizing. Whatever it is, just recognize it. Awareness has re-arisen. Mindfulness has re-arisen. Simply notice what mindfulness has become aware of in its re-arising.

One thing that can be helpful when working with thought is to recognize not just the kind of thinking that's happened—the planning, the judging, the remembering—but the way in which thinking is happening in your mind. This connects to the process of thought, how thoughts actually occur for you. You

might notice them as if you're speaking to yourself, or as if somebody else is speaking to you. Whose voice is it? Your mother's voice? Your partner's voice? Or it might be images. So notice how thinking is happening for you in that moment of waking up. What is it that you've woken up into?

If the thinking is pretty strong, has a charge to it, it's really helpful to notice the emotion underlying it. We're actually waking up not only into the thinking but also into a whole complex of experience that has arisen as a result of the thinking. Thoughts are pretty powerful. When we think certain thoughts, it tends to impact us. If we're thinking about an argument we had with a friend, it can bring up anger in the moment. So in the waking up, is there emotion? Notice the emotion. Notice the feeling tone when you wake up.

This has actually been a really interesting and helpful exploration for me. If there's been some kind of mind storm, some kind of reactivity, you may notice unpleasant experience. If there's been a fantasy, you may notice pleasant experience. But one of the ways I've found this exploration of feeling tone to be particularly helpful is when the mind kind of just drifts out of the present moment—that kind of drifting out I talked about at the beginning, where there's just a little bit of low energy and the mind moves into a kind of drifty space. In my experience, at least, that's a pretty pleasant experience. To connect with the pleasantness of that drifty quality when you wake up gives a little bit of energy to the system. It's a very organic way to connect with that drifting quality of mind, because there's often not much real content to connect with—it's just drifting. But the feeling tone is actually part of what may be holding us in the drifting. The mind has gotten caught in that pleasantness, and it hasn't been noticed. So if we can notice that pleasant quality, we're back. We're connecting with what's actually happening. This has been a really helpful exploration for me—noticing the feeling tone when I wake up.

At one point in my practice, I became really interested in whether I could notice just when the mindfulness returns. I seeded myself with this question: What's the earliest I can be aware of mindfulness coming back? This exploration was actually really helpful in cutting through the whole judging pattern, because what typically happens when we wake up into thinking is that we judge ourselves for thinking, and then we've lost the recognition of that moment of mindfulness. If we're judging ourselves for thinking, there have already been some moments of mindfulness to recognize that we've been thinking. So in taking an interest in this question—how early can I notice the waking up? How early can I notice mindfulness re-arising?—for me, this exploration really cut into the pattern of judging.

And initially, as I explored this, there seemed to be a kind of lag between when mindfulness came up and when mindfulness actually noticed that mindfulness had come up. The mind would wake up—it's like coming out of mud. There's a little bit of awareness, and then the mind sinks back into the mud. A little bit of awareness, and the mind sinks back into the thoughts. A little bit of awareness, and then the mind sinks back. At some point, the awareness gets strong enough to recognize, "Oh, I'm mindful, I'm back."

So it doesn't necessarily happen—at least initially in my exploration—that I was noticing "mindfulness

re-arising," just the spontaneous mindfulness re-arising. It was much hazier than that. But this exploration began to attune me to this moment of mindfulness re-arising. Just this exploration of how soon I could notice it seemed to make me aware of the mindfulness earlier in the process, to the point where I did begin to see: mindfulness re-arising. It's almost like being born in that moment. Suddenly, poof, I'm back. In the midst of reaching up for the shampoo bottle—I'm back, I'm reaching for the shampoo bottle. It's kind of a miracle in a way, that mindfulness re-arises and that we can be there for it re-arising.

So taking an interest in that moment. What does it feel like to be aware now? This was also a key exploration for me: What is the difference between the feeling of being aware now and the feeling of having been lost a few minutes ago, or a few moments ago? We can't really be mindful of the feeling of being lost while in the lostness. But in the waking up, in the moment when we come back into mindfulness, there's a lingering memory of what that feeling of being lost was like. In that experience, there's a contrast between what it feels like to be mindful and what it felt like to be lost.

This exploration, for me at least, really began to point out the qualities of mindfulness—qualities of a mind that is aware and mindful. When I first started sitting, teachers would give instructions in the morning sitting, and often they would say something like, "Feel a sense of presence, connect with a sense of presence in your experience." I would have no idea what they were talking about. I just had no clue what that meant, to connect with a sense of presence. This exploration of the moment of remembering is what began to educate me in what it means to be present.

The feeling of mindfulness is a subtle feeling, but it's actually pretty clear and apparent once you begin to connect with it and pay attention to its qualities. I found that the contrast between the moment of loss and the moment of waking up was a really good place to check into those qualities—the quality of clarity, of brightness, of transparency.

Meditation practice gives us a lot of opportunity to explore this, because we get lost a lot, and this moment of returning happens a lot. Hundreds of times, if not thousands of times through the day, you've got an opportunity to recognize mindfulness coming back. Familiarity with this feeling of mindfulness coming back seems to begin to point out to us when mindfulness comes back. Mindfulness actually comes back a lot through our day, but we don't recognize these moments of spontaneous re-arising that happen all through our day—in daily life and here on retreat.

Spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness happens when we notice the watermelon at the end of the table, and then we leap on it and start planning and thinking about how we're going to get to that watermelon to make sure it's not all gone by the time we get there. We become aware of something, but we aren't aware of the awareness of it. Instead, we leap onto the thing we've noticed and take action or plan around it.

Beginning to familiarize yourself with this feeling of waking up will start to point out these moments of mindfulness to you. This has been a huge gift for my practice, both in retreat and in daily life. These spontaneous moments of mindfulness happen so much. As we get familiar with them, they point

themselves out to us, and we get the benefit of these small moments—small moments of completely effortless mindfulness that happen all the time.

I've talked quite a bit about noticing the returning from wandering back into the present moment. We can also begin to explore the other side of the equation: the getting lost. There's this gray area in the middle where there may not be much we can learn. Sometimes there is. Sometimes there's a foggy area in the middle where there's a little bit of mindfulness, where we may be very stuck to thoughts, and yet there's a little bit of mindfulness where we can feel the sense of what it's like to be caught by that thought. Again, there's not a lot of control we have in that situation until mindfulness accumulates and begins to clearly recognize what's happening. Doubt seems to be this way a lot—we get caught in the story, and at some point it's like, "Oh yeah, this is doubt, right, oh right."

So there is that kind of middle area where we can see where we're lost. But mostly the exploration I'm working with here is on either side of that wandering—the coming back into awareness and the getting lost.

Early on in practice, we may think it's not possible to notice where our minds move out of mindfulness into getting lost. But it actually is something we can begin to recognize: how our mind moves out of the present moment. What is the process by which this happens? I'd like to explore a couple of different ways.

This exploration, just to point back to what I was talking about earlier regarding cause and effect—this exploration of how the mind wanders really begins to educate us on the cause and effect nature of our minds.

One of the key ways that our mind tends to wander is from a sense perception. We recognize something, and we're not clearly mindful that we have recognized it. So there's awareness flowing in the present moment, and then there's some perception of something. Sitting in the meditation hall, we hear footsteps. There's the perception of footsteps. When it's not clearly noticed, a process will tend to unfold.

From recognizing footsteps, we'll tend to start thinking about footsteps. "Somebody's coming into the meditation hall. It's the middle of the sitting." So thinking has started. And then the next step of the process that the Buddha talks about is that it's not simple thinking—it moves into full-blown mental proliferation. *Papañca* is the term the Buddha uses for this. "They're not supposed to be coming into the meditation hall in the middle of the sitting. There are rules about this. I'd better write a note to somebody. We really need to keep the meditation hall quiet. After all, we're doing all these things to make sure the meditation hall is quiet, and here's somebody walking into the hall." We go off. We just get lost.

At any place during this part of the process, we can be aware. But we tend to get caught by something—the footsteps, the thought that it's somebody walking into the meditation hall. That may be what catches us. So we can watch this process happening. This is a cause and effect process: there's sound, there's the perception of the sound, thinking tends to arise very closely after perception, and from that

follows mental proliferation.

We can watch this process, get familiar with this cause and effect. Now, we can't necessarily see the whole thing, but we can notice where we're waking up in this process. And knowing how this process works can begin to help us with seeing how our minds wander.

One of the things I think happens to us is that we're paying attention to experience and we have a bit of an agenda about what we're paying attention to. We're paying attention to our body sensations, connecting very clearly with them. And then we hear the sound. Our attention, our awareness, has connected with the sound and recognized it as footsteps. But there hasn't been clear mindfulness of that, partly because of this agenda for staying with body sensations.

So in the practice here, what we begin to notice is when our minds start to lose touch with our object of meditation. It can be a subtle sense of, "Oh, the attention has moved. It's now noticing sound." If we saw that—if we just saw that the attention had moved to sound—then it would simply be hearing, and it wouldn't necessarily lead to getting lost in thought.

Sometimes we have such strong opinions about things that the opinions kind of come in and take over—the opinion that people shouldn't be coming into the hall at certain times, for instance. But we can watch this process, see how the mind wanders out of the present moment.

Another exploration: not only from sense perception, from the recognition of sound or sight or smell or taste, but also from feeling tone. We can wander out of the present moment from feeling tone.

For example, the breath. The breath feels very comfortable. There's a lot of pleasantness. We're paying attention to the breath, paying attention to the sensations of the breath, and the breath has become so pleasant and so comfortable that we kind of drift out of the present moment into the pleasantness. Not necessarily thinking, but also not terribly mindful of the fact that what is happening is that pleasantness is happening. We get lost in the pleasantness. We don't clearly notice that feeling, and we drift off.

And then perhaps—one pattern I've seen in my own mind—"Oh yeah, this feels really good. I should do more of these retreats." I would often notice the flavor of what was going on based on whether I was planning my next retreat or avoiding my next retreat.

We can also drift out of the present moment in response to neutral experience. We don't often notice when neutral is happening. It's something that we don't connect with. So again, this is part of the key to the mind wandering out—when we don't notice something is happening, we don't clearly connect with it.

Beginning to notice feeling tone, noticing that neutral is happening, can be very revealing. One of the patterns I saw happen many times when my mind was in a place of neutral was a sense of leaning into that neutral, kind of expecting or waiting for something to happen. And when nothing happened, I was a failure. I saw that my mind, from nothing at all, from just a place of neutral experience, could launch into

this very familiar pattern of "I'm a failure, I'm no good."

Neutral, I think, is a really interesting place to watch familiar habits begin. When the mind is in a space of neutral and is not particularly aware of it, familiar habits and patterns are very likely to arise. For me, it was "I'm a failure."

So we can begin to notice the moment that the mind begins to let go a little bit of what it's paying attention to. You're paying attention to the breath, for instance. There's the awareness of the experience of the breath, and we're connected to the breath. If we have a very strong agenda about that, we may not quite notice that the attention is connected to the breath but just not quite as attentive.

I began to notice this on one retreat. I was doing a lot of breath meditation, and I began noticing that I could feel the attention just losing touch a little bit with the breath. When I noticed that, I'd be like, "Oh, okay, I can come back. Come back to the breath." Then I'd notice that the attention lost touch a little bit with the experience of breathing. "Oh, come back to the breath."

At some point, after noticing that several times—that kind of the mind letting go of the object of breathing—I recognized, "Well, I'm mindful. Why don't I see what the mind is doing? Why don't I just see where the mind wants to go?" And the awareness opened up into a new space, a very broad, spacious awareness, a kind of space I'd not been in before. It allowed a deepening of the practice by allowing the mind, being mindful of essentially what the mind is already doing. The mind let go of the breath—what is it doing here? It was almost as if the holding to the breath was not allowing the mind to settle more deeply in that case. So allowing the mindfulness to stay connected with the awareness: Where does it want to go? What does it want to pay attention to?

There are so many different reasons why the mind wanders. The most common, most obvious are of course the obvious defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion—caught in our patterns, caught in our memories that come up. Recollections arise, emotions arise out of that, and we get caught. Very familiar. Reflecting on the past, thinking about the past, thinking about the future, thinking about the present. All of these are some very obvious and familiar reasons why the mind wanders.

Some other reasons why the mind starts to wander: at this point in retreat, at least one thing I've seen is that there seem to be periods of time where things stabilize and there's a feeling of settledness that you get familiar with. And then either it deepens and settles further, or else suddenly it's like, "Whoa, the mind is wandering all over the place! What's going on? It was so settled yesterday."

In my exploration, I've seen several different things that lead to this phenomenon of the mind being relatively settled and then suddenly it's like an explosion of wandering mind.

One thing that happens is that as the mind starts to relax and lets go of the habitual structures we are familiar with, the surface layers of the mind begin to release, and we settle into a kind of ease in that space. What can happen then is that there's been a relaxation of holding ourselves together with familiar

structures of personality. When those familiar structures fall away, sometimes old patterns, deep habits, deep thoughts, and deep feelings can come to the surface because they're no longer being held in. We can open into essentially a new space, and it may be that the very settling is what's allowing this new unsettledness to arise. So it's not necessarily that you've gone backwards. It's a moving into deeper levels of holding, deeper levels of feelings and patterns that will need to surface, that will need to be felt for full freedom to happen.

Another common reason why the mind starts to wander—and this one is probably familiar to some of you—is that the mind gets a bit concentrated, more relaxed, and moves into a kind of dreamlike space. You sit there and it's like you're dreaming. You're not falling asleep, but all these dreamlike images keep arising. Often this is a manifestation of concentration combined with a little bit of low energy. The mind starts to wander because the energy isn't quite in balance with the concentration.

In this kind of space, it's not necessarily helpful to jump on things and say, "I really need to put in a lot more effort here." The mind is actually in a pretty subtle state when there's some concentration but low energy. I've found that very small adjustments can bring up the energy—just open the eyes, or perhaps straighten the spine a little bit. One time I noticed that just thinking "I should stand up" was sufficient. It sent a rush through my body to even have that thought. I realized I could just sit there for a few more minutes because there was more energy in the system. So making small adjustments when the mind is more settled like that can be very helpful.

Another interesting way I've seen wandering happen after times of clarity is that the clarity of mindfulness itself, when we're really, really clearly connecting with moment-to-moment experience, can lead us to subtler experience—experience that we're not so familiar with. And because we're not familiar with it, we get lost.

An example of this, and one of the first times I noticed it, was during a three-month retreat. It was several weeks into the course and the breath had gotten pretty settled, pretty continuous. I was able to stay with my breath for long periods of time. Then one day I sat down and suddenly the mind was just wandering all over the place. What's going on? I began to get curious about this wandering, so I started exploring. I noticed that within the space of a breath or two, the sensations of breath got so subtle that I could hardly feel them anymore. That's when the mind would wander. In seeing that process, I began to learn how to connect with subtle breath.

So just checking in—what is actually happening, particularly if the mind starts to wander after a period of settledness—without assuming that you must have lost your concentration. There are several different reasons why the mind can start to wander in the settling itself, and exploring that wandering, exploring why it's happening, was very helpful for me.

As we get less reactive to the wandering mind and develop more of a sense of "here's mindfulness coming back," there can be a trap: a sense of complacency. There's a fine line between judging ourselves for the

mind wandering and falling into complacency—"No problem, the mind's wandering. Oh, here's mindfulness. Yeah, mindfulness is back"—without really connecting with it. We need to be careful that in letting go of judgment, we don't slip into complacency. I found that interest and curiosity in the wandering mind itself was really key to navigating this edge.

I've described many things that can be noticed in exploring the wandering mind, and I'd like to say that this isn't actually something I'd suggest you try to do—thinking, "I need to do this exploration of the wandering mind." It's more that I'm offering you information, and my main hope in this talk is that you become interested in this process and want to explore for yourself what you notice around it. I've described what I've noticed, and in hearing that, you might begin to see some of these things. But it's not so much that you should try to see how perception leads to thinking, leads to proliferation. It's simply information I'm offering.

And so, having given this talk, I'm going to suggest that you forget it. You don't have to try to remember anything that I've said. But I do hope there's a sense of interest or curiosity in exploring this pattern, because it can lead us to some very deep understanding about our minds.

So let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for your attention.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.