Awareness of Awareness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 59:52

Tonight I'd like to explore another area of experience, one that we've been talking about a lot and yet perhaps not talking about in terms of investigating, and that is investigating mindfulness itself.

I think it can be interesting to explore and get curious about the comings and goings of mindfulness. We're here practicing mindfulness, and sometimes in doing a mindfulness practice, we get a little bit identified with the mindfulness as being something that we're doing, and we don't necessarily think about it as something to investigate. When does mindfulness arise? How does mindfulness arise? Where does mindfulness get lost? Investigating it as a phenomenon can help us to loosen some of that attachment we have to the doing of mindfulness.

There's a lot to learn in this exploration, a lot to learn about how our minds get caught, how our minds do what they do. And so really, I like to encourage a sense of investigation and curiosity rather than judgment. In looking at the coming and going of mindfulness, we can get judgmental about our practice—aren't I supposed to be doing the mindfulness? But we can actually investigate this coming and going.

One thing I want to say here at the beginning of the talk is that I'm going to use the terms mindfulness and awareness kind of synonymously. We all, I think as teachers, use the word awareness somewhat loosely and perhaps differently. So I just wanted to clarify that from the outset.

The first thing I'd like to explore is recognizing mindfulness itself, recognizing what it is, how it feels. The Abhidhamma talks about two ways mindfulness happens for us, and they're called prompted mindfulness and unprompted mindfulness. Prompted mindfulness is what we typically think that we're doing, what we're typically engaged in during our mindfulness practice. Prompted mindfulness is when mindfulness is present, encouraging more mindfulness. We are mindful, and in being mindful, we can encourage ourselves: be aware, pay attention. And so that's prompted mindfulness.

The recognition of the experience of mindfulness itself, in my own exploration of this, I found coming in the exploration of what's called unprompted mindfulness, which is the spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness—something we're all really familiar with. We've been watching this for two weeks now. Mindfulness comes back. It comes back spontaneously.

Typically what we do in that moment is we start doing something with what we have become aware of, especially in our daily lives. These moments of unprompted mindfulness actually happen to us a lot more than we realize. This moment of mindfulness returning, the recognition of what's happening in the

present moment, being aware of what's happening in the present moment—that returns actually quite a lot. But often what happens in that moment is that we get attached to or identified with or kind of stuck to the thing that we've become aware of, and we start doing something with it or thinking about it or trying to figure out what we're supposed to do about that. And so we rarely actually notice that mindfulness has returned, that this faculty of mindfulness has arisen. We're more attuned to recognizing what mindfulness has become aware of, and then often from that, getting lost.

Cultivating this recognition of mindfulness, this recognition of the spontaneous arising of mindfulness, I found to be a very helpful tool for getting familiar with what mindfulness feels like, what the experience of mindfulness is. Partly because there's some contrast in that moment of mindfulness coming back—a little bit of contrast in what the mind feels like now when it's present, aware, connected with experience, and what it felt like a few moments ago when it was not connected with experience, not aware. In that moment of mindfulness arising, there's an opportunity for us to begin to clearly notice the distinction between what it's like to be mindful and what it's like to not be mindful. There can be a lingering memory of the flavor of the mind lost in thought, confused, spinning, in that moment that mindfulness returns.

For me, when I realized this—that this was a great place to begin to get familiar with the distinction between being mindful and not mindful—I stopped judging myself for my wandering mind. If my mind wanders a hundred times in a sitting, that gives me a hundred opportunities to recognize what it's like to be mindful. It's a great tool to shift our perspective about waking up into mindfulness again. Curiosity: what's it like? What's it like to now be aware?

I would encourage this not to be a big project, but just in a light way, seeing if you can take some curiosity, some interest in that experience of awareness. What is it like to be aware?

We can also explore this when we are already mindful. I found that moment of awakening, of waking up, to be a beautiful place to explore it. And we can also explore it when we're already aware. Here, in this place, comes the question or recognition: awareness is here, I'm aware, awareness is present. There is awareness present. Now we may not be able to consciously tap into what that experience is, but we know it at some intuitive level right now. Do you know that you're aware? Usually the answer is yes.

What we are experiencing is another question entirely. Developing familiarity with that experience—awareness itself as distinct from what we are aware of—is part of this exploration. How do we begin to recognize awareness itself as distinct from what we are aware of?

Mostly in our early practice, we are more familiar with noticing what we are aware of and less familiar with noticing the awareness itself. And so this is really the whole subject of the talk today.

So back to this moment of waking up. One of the beautiful things about that moment of unprompted mindfulness, when we can begin to tap into that arising, is that we see it is a moment of awareness that didn't take any effort. It just happened. It begins to give us the sense, a flavor, of what it might mean to

have that relaxed, non-striving mindfulness—that moment when mindfulness arises. Did you do that? Did you have to do anything to make that happen? It happens spontaneously.

Appreciating the quality in this moment of arising of awareness itself, and also the effortless nature of it, the spontaneous arising of it, is actually a pointer to the not-self nature of our experience. Mindfulness arises. Did you do that? It happened. It happened as a result of conditions. Causes and conditions came together for mindfulness to re-arise. There was no one who said, "I'm going to be mindful now." It just happened.

So this exploration of the coming and going of mindfulness begins to point us to this truth of not-self.

In that moment of recognizing mindfulness returning, first of all, just in a light way, recognize that you're now aware. Notice what's obvious. Wake up into what is already happening. There's no need to come back to anything because the mind is already present.

Now depending on what practice you're doing, what tools you're working with, you may in that moment—after you've become aware and recognized awareness and noticed what you are aware of—because awareness comes with an object. There's always the arising of awareness with something that it is aware of. So waking up to what's already happening. And then if you're practicing concentration, because awareness is back, you have the choice. You can now choose. And this is where prompted awareness comes in. We choose what to pay attention to. Or we choose to simply settle back and allow the next thing and the next thing and the next thing.

So this side of exploring awareness—noticing what it feels like to be aware. What does it feel like to be aware? And again, one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says don't look too hard for it. You know, if you know that you're aware, that's actually enough. Over time, the feeling of awareness or the experience of awareness, the experience of what it means to be aware, becomes more of a felt sense or it becomes more clear. But initially, at least for me, it was not obvious.

It's actually, in some ways, such a familiar experience. Being aware is such a familiar experience that it's like the air we breathe. We don't really notice it. It's the water we're swimming in. The fish swimming in water doesn't really know it's in water. The experience of awareness, of recognizing awareness, is kind of like that. It's so close to us that it's not obvious, even though we know that we're aware.

So it's kind of almost a koan for us to have that curiosity: What is awareness? What is this experience of awareness?

The next side of this that I'd like to explore is how do we lose awareness? Where and how do we lose awareness? Again, the comings and goings of mindfulness teach us a lot about our minds and inform us, give us some support for our mindfulness practice.

This side of exploring where we lose mindfulness really supports the practice of continuity, because as we

get familiar with where we lose awareness—where awareness wanders out, where mindfulness wanders out the door into thought—as we get familiar with those places, those activities, those mind states, those times that mindfulness leaves, we can add a little bit of interest to those times and perhaps begin to watch the mind lose interest, begin to leave the object that it's noticing.

This exploration of noticing where the mind wanders out isn't intended to be a judgment.

It's more, again, curiosity to learn about our minds.

Now again, anattā, not-self. We are actually, moment by moment, all day long, presented with evidence for this truth of not-self. And we just don't recognize it.

One of the ways the Buddha talked about not-self in the famous discourse on the characteristic of not-self: he talked about our mind and body processes not being under our control as being evidence for not-self. He talked about this in respect to the five aggregates that Guy spoke about the other day. Body is out of our control. Body is not self. Feelings are not self. Perceptions are not self. Mental formations are not self. Consciousness is not self.

And mindfulness, the factor of mindfulness, is a mental formation. It is an arising, like concentration, like anger, like confusion, like all the various states of mind. It is a mental formation. It is created by causes and conditions and has some intentionality to it.

And of mental formations, along with all the other aggregates, the Buddha says: "Volitional formations are non-self. For if volitional formations were self, volitional formations would not lead to affliction. And it would be possible to determine of mental formations: 'Let my mental formations be thus. Let my mental formations not be thus.'"

Would you do that if you could? "May my mind be filled with bliss." And boom, the mind is filled with bliss. "May mindfulness be perfectly continuous." Boom, mindfulness is perfectly continuous. Would you do that? Can we do that? No.

And as the Buddha says, "Because volitional formations are non-self, volitional formations lead to affliction, and it is not possible to determine of volitional formations: 'Let my volitional formations be thus. Let my volitional formations not be thus.'"

So mindfulness leaves. If we had control over mindfulness, if mindfulness were under control of self, if there were a self that could control it, we would do that. So this fact that the mind wanders out—let's not judge it, let's explore it. Let's look at this phenomenon of mindfulness leaving.

We might lose awareness in specific activities in our day: washing dishes, going into our rooms. Investigate for yourself. What are the times that seem to be the mindfulness black holes? Doing your yogi job, maybe taking a walk on the loop. What are the activities that you tend to lose mindfulness in?

Now, I'm not suggesting that you stop doing those activities. Often we can't. We lose mindfulness going into our dorm rooms. That seems to be a place where it's like, "Oh, the door's closed. I can do anything I want. I don't have to be mindful here." But we have to go into our rooms to go to bed, to get our things, whatever. So this is not saying to avoid the activities where we lose mindfulness, but to be curious about the process by which we lose it.

When we become aware that we're losing mindfulness in certain activities, one of my teachers says it's like we can add a little salt to that activity. Be curious. Be interested. How does it happen that mindfulness gets lost when I go into my room?

How does it happen that mindfulness gets lost when I do my yogi job? Be curious about that.

At one point on a retreat, I began to realize that I got lost going into the bathroom. And at some point I realized that one of the key places I was getting lost was staring at myself in the mirror. I would wake up staring at myself in the mirror and think, "Wow, didn't notice that was in the field." I clearly was just waking up and finding myself staring at myself in the mirror.

So I began to get curious about this—just to explore what was happening that I wasn't able to be present in the bathroom. I started exploring, and it was kind of like I'd go into the bathroom thinking, "Okay, probably going to lose awareness here. Let's see if I can catch it this time." And it was a long time—this was on a month-long retreat—and it would be, "Ah, lost it again." I'd wake up staring at myself, and I hadn't caught it. "Ah, next time maybe." So rather than beating myself up about it, it was more like, "Ah well, I'll just keep trying. I'll just try next time."

And at some point, when I was washing my hands, I noticed the intention to look up. Guy was talking about intention the other day. Just being more continuously mindful while washing my hands, I noticed the intention to look up. It was kind of a habit to look at myself in the mirror while washing my hands. It wasn't some deep emotional thing of needing to be mirrored or see myself—it was simply a habit of mind. The curiosity began to reveal that habit, and it began to allow me to be conscious in a place where I had habitually gotten lost, because I got interested, because I got curious about it.

We also might lose awareness in states of body—with pain, or even with really pleasant physical sensations, which can come particularly as the mind gets more concentrated. That can be a doorway out of which the mind wanders. So again, investigating this, being curious about it.

I'll tell a story around my own exploration of this, around pain—getting lost in pain. One of the ways, one of the many ways that I got lost in pain... I found several different strategies my mind used to avoid pain by getting lost in various other states. And one of the states my mind got lost in when there was pain was singing. I would wake up seeing that I was singing a song in my head.

So I began exploring this. Rather than trying to double down, to be with the pain, to try to avoid the singing, I got curious. It was kind of like settling back: "Okay, I see that the mind is kind of leaving from

this place of pain. Can I get curious about how this happens?" And in waking up into the singing, what I noticed was that when the mind moved to singing, it lost some of its grip on the pain. I recognized that the singing was actually a strategy the mind had to let go of the pain.

This is something to be curious about with our own relationship to pain in particular. The mind has strategies that it uses. It has ways it has figured out to let go of pain, or ignore pain, or not have to deal with pain. Often we have that capacity in our minds—it just clicks into some other state, maybe spacing out, or singing in this case.

What I noticed in that waking up is that the mind had lost its grip on the pain. And in the waking up and seeing that the mind had lost the grip, there were a few moments I could experience the pain without being so tight around it. That began to give the mind an education in the possibility: "Oh, it's actually possible to be with pain without this tightening and squeezing and bearing down."

The mind would then go into the gripping again. That was my habit around pain—when I wasn't checked out, I would kind of bear down on it, squeeze into it, force the mind into it. But because I had that opportunity in waking up into the experience of singing and seeing that the mind had let go of that grip, getting the sense or the experience of not being in the grip of pain while present for the pain, I could then begin to see the grip arise. Seeing that arising of the bearing down, the mind began to understand how it was involved in that gripping. And the gripping intensified the pain. It was very clear that that fastening to the pain intensified it.

The mind began to understand, on its own in effect. Without my having to try to stop what the mind was doing, the mind began to understand that when it grips down on pain, the pain is worse. And the mind began to learn how to not do that without using the strategy of singing. It began to be able to stay present for the pain without either the gripping happening or the ejecting into another state of mind.

So again, curiosity—curiosity about where we lose awareness and interest in exploring what's happening there. We might lose awareness in states of mind: boredom, confusion, thoughts of work, planning, fantasy. Here, often we notice what we have gotten lost in almost in retrospect, like in the description of losing awareness in places, in things we're doing. Often we notice after the fact. Like in the bathroom—I noticed after the fact that I had been lost in thought.

Likewise with states of mind, we may wake up and realize, "Wow, I've been gone for a while. The last thing I remember was that boredom was present." We may know in the waking up, recognize, "Oh, okay, I was trying to hang out with boredom and that's where the mind got lost." Recognizing what we wake up into can help us in that moment of waking up, that noticing we're aware and what we're aware of. In that moment of waking up, if we wake up into fantasy or boredom or confusion, the simple recognizing—"Oh, okay, I'm aware, this awareness is back, and the state of mind is confusion or boredom"—the familiarity with what we've become aware of begins to help us recognize the state more quickly.

An example of this from my own practice around anger. This was actually my very first meditation practice in daily life. Anger was kind of out of control in my mind, and I vowed to myself, "I'll wake up when anger happens." Just that commitment, because I had recognized anger was a big issue. I would just get lost in anger. And so that commitment to recognizing "anger is present" began to have an impact. Just that orientation—"I want to remember, I want to wake up when that mind state is happening"—began to change things. And I began to wake up in it.

The first few times I woke up into it, I was in a rage. I could notice, "Yep, well, this is anger." Unpleasant. It was pretty early in my meditation practice, and it was kind of like, "What do I do with this? I have no idea." At that point it was, "Well, I don't know what to do with this. I guess I go back to work." In retrospect, I saw that actually just that simple recognition gave me some space. It allowed me to go back to work. Before, I had been frozen at my keyboard—I was working on the computer, frozen, not able to do anything. The recognition—"Oh, anger, this is anger, this is rage"—allowed me to go back to work.

But this practice, over the course of several months, began to show something remarkable. I began to notice that the mindfulness woke up into the pattern of anger earlier and earlier and earlier in the process. There was much more of a kind of normal anger arising, much less challenging to be with, the more I practiced with this. And then, really beginning to be able to see the arising of anger—huge insights into the mind that kind of actually wanted to get angry. That was an eye-opening thing, to see a thought arise in my mind and sense the inclination of the mind to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry.

And in that moment of seeing that, having spent all of those months paying attention to anger arising, being present for anger in the moment, having spent all of that time paying attention to anger, the mind knew deeply that anger was suffering, anger was dukkha. And so when the mind saw itself headed towards anger, when the mind realized it was headed in that direction, the mind simply said, "I don't think so. That way lies suffering. Let's not do that." And I didn't have to do that, actually. That happened because of the awareness. Wisdom made that choice. Wisdom made the choice to not follow that intention, to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry.

So this is the power of being curious about where we get lost. Now also, in terms of where we get lost in states of mind, there's sometimes—and we've talked about this, so I'll just drop this in to complete this area.

There are times when we get lost in certain states of mind where the state of mind has a gravitational pull on us. Someone used the word quicksand. Others often use the phrase "going down the rabbit hole" of that mind state. It's like there's no traction for mindfulness. And so that's another way we get lost, that mindfulness gets lost.

It's really helpful to know for yourself when you're entering that gravitational pull—like the black hole of that state of mind. The notion of a black hole is that when light gets to a certain closeness to that

gravitational pull, it won't be possible for light to escape. It's kind of like that with certain mind states: if we try to bring mindfulness to them, the mindfulness just gets sucked into the black hole.

Recognizing that—recognizing the rabbit hole, the quicksand of the state of mind—means knowing when it's appropriate and helpful to say "not now." Just not even try to be mindful of that. With myself, I would kind of bow to that state of mind and say, "I see you. I see you, and I can't be mindful of you right now. I'll be mindful of you when my mindfulness is stronger, but you do your thing and I'm just going to pay attention to my feet right now." So just to redirect the attention rather than get sucked into that gravitational pull.

Another very interesting place that we lose awareness—and I think Carol mentioned this the other night—is as practice deepens, when the mind begins to get more stable. There's a kind of cycle that happens on retreat. We have a period of time where the mindfulness seems pretty stable and clear, and then suddenly it's like—it's crazy. There's a purification cycle that can happen. After a period of time of having a more continuous mindfulness, with the mind being in a more open state, sometimes what happens is that something that's been repressed or pushed down by the normal habits and structures of our mind—it's kind of like that thing goes, "Oh good, there's space. Let me out." And anger erupts, or confusion erupts, or whatever. So there's that possibility that as the mind settles, we go through these purification cycles.

Another way the mind gets lost as it settles—and this happens more frequently than I had realized when I first began recognizing it as a pattern—is this: when I've had a period of time when the mindfulness is pretty stable, and then suddenly I start to notice a lot of wandering mind, I get interested in what's happening. What seems to occur sometimes with the settling of the mind and the continuity of mindfulness is that as mindfulness becomes more continuous, it begins to gravitate toward somewhat more subtle experience. With our usual agendas—paying attention to this, noticing that aspect of experience—sometimes we don't notice that mindfulness is actually attuning to a subtler level of experience. And in not noticing that, that's a doorway for the mind to start wandering.

An example from my practice: I was sitting the three-month course and the awareness had gotten pretty settled, pretty stable. I could be pretty clear with the breathing, pretty much for an entire sitting. It was just right there. And then one morning I sat down and the mind was just all over the place. I thought, "Wow, what happened to my mindfulness?" I had developed enough curiosity to rather than doubling down with "I'm going to just stay with the breath," I got curious about where the mind was leaving, where it was wandering.

What I discovered was that within one or two breaths, when I actually got much more attentive to what the mindfulness was connecting with, as I observed the in-breath and the out-breath, within the space of one or two breaths, the sensations of breath almost disappeared. And the mind wandered. That was where the mind was wandering. The sensations were getting so subtle that the mindfulness wasn't quite

sure how to meet it. Or I wasn't quite sure how to meet it with mindfulness.

One time this was happening on a retreat in Burma. What I had decided on that retreat, because I wasn't as skilled or familiar with this practice, was to turn my attention to something more obvious—some more obvious experience, like the sensations of my butt—rather than seeing if I could be with the subtle experience. I reported this to Sayadaw U Pandita, and I said, "The sensations of the breath are getting so subtle that I turned my attention to something more obvious." He said, "You don't have to do that. Just notice the subtle breath." I thought, "Oh, that's possible?" And I began playing with that, almost using that as my note: "Subtle breath is happening. Subtle breath is happening." That allowed the mindfulness to begin to connect with the subtler level of experience.

The mind can also lose awareness in places or mind states that we think it's not possible to be mindful of. Sleepiness, for example. Dullness of mind. Spacing out. Spacing out seems to be the quintessential non-mindful activity, right? How would it be possible to be mindful of spacing out? One day I was noticing my mind spacing out over breakfast.

And rather than having — well, at first actually, it was kind of like, "Oh, spacing out, come back." You know, eating breakfast. Pay attention to the breakfast — lifting, tasting, chewing — and the mind would space out. Okay, come back. This bringing back, bringing back, bringing back. This notion of can't be mindful while spacing out, so bring it back to what you can be mindful of.

At some point, I began to just get curious about this. Where is the mind leaving breakfast? Where is it leaving the experience of eating breakfast? And what I experienced was that I was paying attention to the sensations of eating, and then I felt this letting go happen from the sensations of eating. What it felt like was that the mind kind of went and just hung out up here somewhere — above and to the right of my head — just in a zoned out experience. And to my surprise, I could be mindful of that.

Actually, what I recognized in that moment of being mindful of that spacing out was that the mind needed rest. It was tired, and it was taking its rest. Whether I had anything to say about it or not, it was going to take its rest. And when I allowed the mindfulness of it, I noticed it lasted for maybe thirty seconds, a minute. And then clarity of other experience began to arise.

Sometimes when the mind is leaving the present moment, it's letting go. What I understood in that experience was that I had been kind of harsh with myself — "stay here, stay here, stay here" — when the mind actually needed a rest. And I could allow it to do that mindfully. I think it actually allowed it to rest more deeply because of the mindfulness.

This points to beginning to recognize when mindfulness lets go of an object. On another retreat, I was exploring the breath, staying with the breath, and I began to get very attuned to the quality of the mindfulness of the breath. I could see the mindfulness of the breath pretty clearly, and I began to see the mind lose a little bit of interest in the breath. The awareness and the breath were like this — the

mindfulness and the breath were touching, right near each other. And then I began to get the sense of what it meant for the mindfulness to lose a little interest, to go into that not-so-mindful-of-the-breath experience.

Initially I was recognizing that and coming back to the breath. Then it would leave the breath. Come back, leave, come back. At some point I got curious, because I realized I was aware while the mind was leaving the breath. I thought, well, where does it want to go? Let's see where it wants to go. And that was the beginning of a deepening into a whole different domain of experience. The mind moved into a very spacious, settled, quiet place — a place I hadn't actually touched into before.

So curiosity around mindfulness leaving the object — sometimes it takes us deeper. Sometimes it educates us in how our mind has strategies to deal with things like pain. In any case, making this kind of exploration begins to reveal new things about the mind.

This also points to the way we sometimes think the mind has to be in a particular state in order to meditate. I think this comes with some familiarity around what it feels like when it's clear. When mindfulness is really clear and we know just exactly moment by moment what's happening — that happens from time to time. Maybe it happens for a few moments, maybe a little bit longer. But we all enter into that place where it's so clear, and we think that's what we're going for. We try to find that. And we may find ourselves trying to put ourselves into certain states of mind in order to construct that. I certainly found myself doing that.

On one retreat I was practicing in Burma, doing walking meditation. As I ended my walking meditation, I was moving to the dorm where I was doing most of my meditation in my room. As I approached my dorm, I found myself trying to put my mind into the meditative state. Seeing that, actually watching the mind do that — well, wait a minute, what's wrong with this state? Awareness is present. Does it need to be any other way?

What I recognized somewhat later, after feeling that happen a few times—that kind of movement toward what I thought the meditative state was—was that it was actually a subtle repression of thought. I was moving into a state where there was a kind of holding thought at bay.

There's no need to actually put yourself into a certain state to meditate. If you are aware, meditation can unfold. Checking back to that early part of the talk: Can you recognize that you're aware? Am I aware? And what am I aware of?

When I find myself trying to change the state of my mind in order to meditate, I ask myself if it's necessary. It may be. There are times when the mind needs a little bit more of a container, more of a sense of directing the attention, choosing the object, being with the breath, stabilizing the attention. There are times when that's necessary. Other times, check in to see that awareness is present. What is awareness aware of? It may be pointing to something new or unfamiliar. So try mindfulness first before assuming

that you can't necessarily be mindful in a particular mind state.

There are also different ways that the mind observes. Again, if we have some idea of how it's supposed to be when I'm mindful, we may miss the fact that there are actually quite a lot of different ways that the mind pays attention.

One distinction I'd like to point to that we've talked about a little bit is a distinction between mindfulness and attention. Attention is a factor of mind that is essentially choosing an object or connecting with an object—choosing an object, let's say. Attention chooses what to pay attention to. And attention is an interesting factor of mind in that it is amenable to agency, to conscious choice around what we pay attention to. We can say, "I'm going to pay attention to the breath right now." We can choose where to direct attention. But attention is also happening in every moment, whether we're choosing it or not. If we're not consciously choosing it, generally our conditioning is choosing what attention is landing on. And this is the exploration of open awareness: What is the mind choosing to pay attention to?

Sometimes people have the sense, before they get familiar with open awareness, that if I'm not choosing an object, I'm not meditating. But we can be mindful of experience when we're directing attention or when we are allowing what we attend to be chosen by the mind itself.

So that's one difference in how we can pay attention. The mind can choose an object—there can be a conscious engagement with choosing an object—or the mind can be in a more open, receptive space. In that open, receptive space, there are also different ways that the mind can pay attention. It can be broad and panoramic, kind of like a wide-angle lens. The visual field or the auditory field can be an interesting way into recognizing the different ways the mind can pay attention. We can pay attention in the visual field by not focusing on anything, but just taking in a wide panorama. Likewise, in the auditory field, we can not land or settle down on any one sound, but just take in the whole symphony of sounds. That broad awareness, taking in the breadth of experience, is one way that the mind can be clearly aware.

Or the mind might pick up on individual experience. It might notice this, and then that, and then that, and then that in that open awareness. It might very clearly land on a sound, a body sensation, an emotion, a thought, a body sensation, a breath—just very clearly, like popcorn almost, the mind picking up on individual experience. It might feel like the awareness is jumping from thing to thing. It might feel like it's flowing from experience to experience. So many different ways that mindfulness can function. And to have any idea that it's supposed to feel a particular way may obscure the understanding of something new. This is something I have really begun to appreciate.

Sometimes the awareness feels like we're separate from the object. There's a distance between the knowing, the observing, and the thing observed. And it can be very clear that the mind is balanced and at ease in that time. Other times it feels like the awareness and the thing observed are just right there together. It's like the awareness is rising up right into the middle of the experience. Both, in my experience, seem to have that quality of ease, relaxation.

I reported this to Sayadaw U Tejaniya at one point. I said, "I recognize that there are these different ways that the mind can feel at ease when observing. Sometimes it feels like there's a separation with the object."

And sometimes it feels like the mindfulness is right in the middle of the object. His response was that these are two different perspectives on the same experience. In one case, the awareness is actually highlighting the difference between the object and the knowing. In the other case, the awareness is highlighting the fact that they're happening together. Neither one is right, neither one is better. They are simply different ways that mindfulness can meet experience.

Notice how it is. Notice how it is for you.

That is my main hope from this exploration with you this evening—that you will get curious about your mind. Get curious about what it pays attention to, how it gets lost, what it feels like to be mindful. This exploration I sometimes call "Your Mind 101." Get familiar with what your mind does. Rather than having some agenda for it to be doing something, simply ask: what is it doing? Know the skillful means of when it's helpful to ground the attention, to choose an object.

This exploration also opens us into a doorway of some of the fundamental processes of the mind, of beginning to see how the mind does what it does. It starts to illuminate feeling, perception, consciousness, mental formation. It starts to illuminate the processes of the mind and supports our understanding of them as processes—not something I'm in control of, but something that can be known and understood.

And that wisdom brings freedom.

Let's sit for a moment.

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