Investigating Mindfulness Itself

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:04

We've been talking quite a lot about continuity of mindfulness as a support for the stability of mind and the ability to meet just what's happening in our experience. I'd like to explore this side of practice a little bit tonight—how to encourage this continuity by investigating mindfulness itself. In particular, I'd like to explore with you what we could call the comings and goings of mindfulness, framing it in a slightly different way than we usually think about it.

Usually we think about the mind getting lost or wandering off. Here I'd really like to emphasize the mindfulness piece. Mindfulness is stronger at times, weaker at times, and we can investigate that—investigate when that happens, how that happens, what's going on around it. We can be curious about the coming and going of mindfulness as opposed to feeling like this is a problem that needs to be fixed or changed.

There's a lot we can learn in this exploration. One big area we can learn about is where our minds get caught. What is it that hooks us such that mindfulness disappears? Where are our mindfulness sinks? Where are the rabbit holes of mindfulness, where mindfulness just kind of disappears? That's one big area we learn about in exploring this.

We also, in investigating this, if we are curious instead of judgmental about this process of seeing mindfulness as it gets stronger at times and weaker at times, get to see in our direct experience some of the teaching around not-self. Some direct understanding of not-self.

Many of you have probably reflected in this way. When we sit down to meditate, we attempt to be mindful. We try to pay attention to our experience, maybe choose the breath, pick an object to pay attention to. That's our purpose and our intention. And yet what happens? We maybe can stay with experience for a few seconds or a few minutes and the mind wanders. Mindfulness gets lost. Did you do that? Did you decide, "I'm going to have my mind wander right now"? Or did it just happen? This is a pointer to not-self.

And even more amazing, the mind's off wandering in thought and then it comes back. Who did that? You weren't even there to have any say in the matter. This points, again, to not-self.

One of the framings of the not-self teaching that the Buddha offered was to reflect on whether or not our minds and bodies are under our absolute control. In one of his famous discourses, the second discourse he gave, he reflected on this around the five aggregates—body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I'll say it with respect to consciousness because it really highlights this. He says,

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, it would be possible to say of consciousness, 'May my consciousness be thus. May my consciousness not be thus.' But it is not possible to say of consciousness, 'May my consciousness be thus.' And it is precisely because it is not self that that is the case."

This exploration of mindfulness coming and going really begins to point this truth out to us. Our minds are not under our absolute control. We cannot say to ourselves, "I am going to sit down and be mindful for 45 minutes." Is anybody able to do that? Maybe at times, rare times, I've been able to do that, but it's not the common thing.

I want to point out here that in this talk I'm going to be using the terms awareness and mindfulness synonymously. Joseph talked about this the other night, but I wanted to state that very clearly. That is how I'm going to be using these two terms.

One of the avenues of exploring mindfulness itself is to begin to recognize it, to begin to recognize what it means to be aware.

What is the experience of being aware?

One of the easiest places to recognize this is the moment when mindfulness returns—that spontaneous awakening I just spoke of. That moment is one of the easiest places to highlight what the experience of being aware, being mindful, actually is. Because as Joseph said the other night, in that moment there's a little bit of a difference. In that moment of the mind waking up, there's a lingering memory perhaps, a little bit of a sense of what it was like just a few moments before when the mind was lost, and what it's like right now when mindfulness is present. And so you begin to get a sense of the flavor of awareness itself.

This is what we might call unprompted mindfulness. It's not mindfulness that we are consciously choosing to do. One of the great things about that moment, one of the really helpful things to recognize, is just how effortless it is, just how spontaneous it is. It doesn't take work to have that moment arise.

One of the things I've seen in my own practice is that highlighting that moment—beginning to recognize what it feels like when mindfulness returns—actually makes us familiar with what it feels like for mindfulness to return. If, rather than judging ourselves for the fact that we were lost in thought, we instead highlight the arising of mindfulness and bring curiosity about mindfulness itself in that moment, we begin to get familiar with what it's like to have that moment. And the familiarity with that experience starts to help us recognize it more often.

What we see as we start to get familiar with that moment of mindfulness arising is that it happens a lot. It happens a lot. Often what happens in that moment is that we start thinking about or orienting to the thing we've become mindful of, and we may—if we're not attuned to that moment, if we're not interested in that moment of arising mindfulness itself—have a moment of mindfulness returning and then quickly it gets swamped. We hear a bird and then we start thinking about birds. Or we hear the sound of a truck and we start thinking about what that truck is doing.

If we're interested instead in the actual reappearance of mindfulness, that very experience, that familiarity, starts to point out or highlight these moments to us.

This is actually one of my favorite practices for daily life. When people say, "I don't have time to do mindfulness, I don't have time to be mindful in my daily life," I tell them about this. This moment doesn't take any effort. It's just the recognition of it re-arising.

When you notice that moment, the first thing is to recognize: what is the experience of being aware? What is that experience? Notice just what's obvious in that moment. There's the awareness itself and something that awareness is aware of. In that moment of recognition, highlight the awareness and notice what is here now. What is already here? What is the awareness, what is mindfulness, already aware of? Mindfulness has arisen. It's already attending to something. We don't have to pick anything to be aware of in that moment. It's already happening.

Another helpful thing to do in that moment, or to check into—and do this with a light touch—is from time to time, in that moment of arising mindfulness, you could also check in: what's my relationship to this? Very often, at least earlier in practice, especially at the beginning of retreats, the attitude when mindfulness returns is judgment. The mind shouldn't have been wandering. It's really helpful to recognize that attitude in the mind.

But as that judgment starts to fall away, we can start to see something important. When mindfulness disappears, the mind hasn't been switched off. We know this. When mindfulness disappears, the mind continues doing its thing, often going off thinking thoughts about various things. And in that wandering, the mind may have landed on something from our past, or some conversation we had with somebody before we came to retreat, and emotions may start to be generated.

Sometimes in that moment of mindfulness returning, if we don't check into the attitude, we may miss that the wandering mind has created a new terrain, actually, a new landscape. Opening to that, checking the attitude, can help us to see what was created in the wander.

We can also explore and get familiar with the feeling of awareness when we are already aware. In my own experience, my own exploration of this topic in my own practice, I did find the moment of remembering, the moment when mindfulness returned, to be pretty much the easiest place to recognize awareness.

When awareness is already present, when it's already kind of going, sometimes we know that we're aware, but we don't exactly know what the experience of awareness is. And that's okay.

So sometimes, if there is a period of time where the mindfulness seems to be strong, there's a little bit more continuity of mindfulness, you could just check in, drop in the question: What is it to be aware? What is it to be mindful right now? And don't go looking very hard for it.

Like right now, I think probably most of you are aware and listening to the talk. So just check in. Do you know that you're aware right now? Don't think about it. Do you know that you're aware? Just kind of acknowledge that you know you're aware. And then don't go looking any further than that.

Over time what I've seen is that just that simple acknowledgment—yeah, I know I'm aware—begins to reveal something. Now, can I point to what it means to be mindful or aware in that moment? Can I point to that and say, "Oh, that's it"? That's harder to do. But we can know that we are aware. And over time, that kind of reflection can help us to again land in the experience of knowing awareness itself, of being aware of awareness itself.

Now I'd like to explore this topic from another perspective. I've explored it mostly from the side of when awareness returns. And I'd like to explore what it means to pay attention to mindfulness in terms of noticing where we lose mindfulness.

Getting curious about this really helps to support continuity. It's not intended as a judgment to notice where we lose awareness, but more to support the sense of, "Oh, look at that, I see that's where I'm losing awareness, maybe I can be curious about that." Over and over I'm going to point to this quality of curiosity around this practice—curiosity around how we lose mindfulness, as opposed to, "Oh, I see I lose mindfulness, let me double down and really hold on to that mindfulness." Curiosity is really an ally for us in this exploration of mindfulness.

I'm going to talk about various ways, different avenues of exploring where and how we lose mindfulness. Some of the most obvious places for us to check in—and many of you have actually been reporting in the interviews noticing this kind of thing—is recognizing particular activities, times of day, things that you're doing in which you lose mindfulness.

You might begin to recognize that when you go to your rooms, you lose mindfulness. Or maybe when you're standing in the dish line, you're quite mindful, and then you go to do your dishes and you've done your dishes, you're drying off your hands, and it's like, "Whoa, wait a minute, where did that mindfulness go?" So you see you lose it in the actual washing of dishes. Or you might notice that you're losing mindfulness in your yogi job. There are so many different activities that we do during the day. You may have some favorite places for mindfulness to get lost. Be curious about that.

One of the interesting things about continuity of mindfulness is that the stronger mindfulness gets, the more continuous it becomes, the more it points out the gaps in mindfulness. It's not that you're less mindful—actually the mindfulness is stronger and it's able to see more where it's getting lost.

Take that example of standing in the dish line. You're standing there, very mindfully holding your plate and taking a step, very mindfully, and then it's your turn. And then maybe what happens is that you speed up a little bit, or you think, "Oh, I don't want to hold up the line." That might be one thing that arises: "I don't want to hold up the line. Let me do this really quickly." And it's not so much the speediness of

washing the dishes that has you lose the mindfulness, but maybe the idea that you've taken birth, as Carol was saying, concocted this self of, "Oh, I need to be fast in doing this so that the people behind me have their turn quickly."

What I'd like to encourage here is that when you notice places or times or activities in which you lose mindfulness, rather than thinking about doubling down—standing in the dish line thinking, "Yes, I'm going to hold onto that mindfulness, I am going to be mindful all the way through washing those dishes"—rather than doing that, continue your practice as usual and see if you can add a little dose of curiosity. What happens in that situation that mindfulness gets lost?

When mindfulness gets lost, there's usually something we've missed. There's something that's arisen that we haven't seen, and our mind has exited—the mindfulness has exited right out that door. So adding some curiosity: What is it? What is it that's happening in that situation? Curiosity can help to reveal just what is going on, rather than trying to double down and hold on to mindfulness.

I did this exploration for myself. I noticed it was like—

I was pretty mindful throughout—this was at a retreat at Spirit Rock, a month-long retreat, I think. There was lots of continuity of mindfulness throughout the day. And what I began to recognize was that I'd be pretty mindful, and then when I was in the bathroom, I would be mindful going in and doing my stuff, and then washing my hands, and at some point I would find myself gazing at myself in the mirror. I had no recollection of doing that consciously. But I would wake up—it couldn't have been very long, maybe two or three seconds—and I got very curious about what that was. What's going on there?

So I began to explore, not trying to force myself to be mindful. If I was forcing myself to be mindful, that would probably mean forcing myself not to look in the mirror. Instead, I was curious about what was bringing up that activity.

It took a while to see what was going on. And it wasn't any deep, dark old pattern of wanting to be seen, nothing psychological—it was a habit. Just a habit. If mindfulness got weak for just a split second, the habit of what I did in the bathroom kicked in: looking at myself in the mirror. And after I saw that, I could begin to see the intention to look up, the intention to look at myself in the mirror. Then I could choose: Do I do that? Do I not do that? This supports the continuity of mindfulness.

Sometimes people attribute their mindfulness getting lost in a particular place or time to something they're trying to avoid. Sometimes it's as simple as habit. So let go of theories about why you may or may not be mindful at a particular time and just be curious about what is actually happening there.

You might also lose awareness in certain bodily states—pleasant states, unpleasant states. Sometimes as concentration develops and the body starts feeling very delightful, very pleasant, we can get lost in that pleasantness. We're just blissing out, not really clearly aware of the pleasantness. Or we get caught in states of pain. This is an interesting thing to explore: when you're paying attention to pain, observing it,

and the mind gets lost or drifts out of the present moment.

What I discovered over and over again was that if I was noticing pain in the body, the mind had various strategies to avoid experiencing that pain. And most of those strategies involved not being mindful—I would say all of them, until I started noticing the strategies themselves. When I would wake up into that experience, whatever strategy the mind had employed, I would recognize that while it was off doing that thing—sometimes a fantasy, which can be common when there's a lot of physical pain—the pain wasn't bothering me.

I got curious about that. The mind understood that it didn't have to be bothered by that pain. It just didn't know how to do that with mindfulness yet.

One example from a couple of years ago: I was teaching a retreat and noticing a lot of back pain during the teaching and in the sittings. I would attend to the pain, noticing its changing nature, and then I would wake up to find the mind singing. At first it was like, "Okay, come back, be with the experience." But then I got curious about waking up into singing. And I noticed that in that waking up, the mind had let go of its grip on the pain. Before the mind had gotten lost, there had been this kind of pushing in, an "I'm going to be with this pain" kind of experience.

And the singing, waking up into the singing—in the first moment of waking up into the singing, the mind recognized that it wasn't gripped to that pain, and there was a different relationship that was possible to that pain. So in that moment, in being mindful that the mind was not gripped to that pain, I watched in the next few moments as the grip returned. But I had, for just a few moments, seen what it was like to be with pain without that clamping down on it.

So I just watched this. I tried to watch the mind's strategy of how it worked with pain. And as I explored that, the mind learned something about how to let go of clamping down, gripping to the pain, and be able to stay mindful of it. Actually, in that exploration, the need to do the singing disappeared, because the mind began to understand how to be present and not clamped down on the pain.

This was through curiosity. Sometimes the mind understands things. Singing itself wasn't—singing and being lost in thought wasn't necessarily skillful. But the mind knew. There was some wisdom in the mind that knew the way I was paying attention to that pain was not helpful, and it created this strategy. So exploring that strategy, I learned something about how the mind could let go of squeezing down around pain.

A similar kind of getting lost can happen around states of mind. I think we all have our favorite states of mind that we may get lost in—boredom, confusion, depression, planning, various states. You can begin to recognize, and this is another place where the moment of remembering will serve us.

If you're mindful, and then notice that the mind has kind of spun out or gotten lost—so the mindfulness has disappeared—in the moment of remembering, if we've gotten lost through a state of mind, often the

mind will be hooked into that state as it's gotten lost. So as we wake up into mindfulness, there are remnants of that state. You may be aware, "Oh, boredom is present," or "Anger is present."

When I first started my mindfulness practice, the thing that was really spinning me out was anger. I was so angry at a particular person. And my very first mindfulness practice was to just notice when I was angry. Mostly what that meant was waking up after having been caught by anger for some time. The mindfulness had gotten lost and my mind was just spinning, and then I'd wake up into anger. I began to just say, "Okay, wake up, notice what's here. This is anger. Anger is present."

That moment of remembering and connecting with what's there—when the mind has gotten lost in states of mind, sometimes the mindfulness isn't so strong around that particular state of mind. And the place that we can begin to get familiar with that state of mind is in the moment of waking up. So for me, waking up into anger was like, "Yes, okay, yep, this is anger. Boy, unpleasant. This doesn't feel very good."

What happens as we do that, as we connect with the experience of remembering to a particular state that we've been lost in, is that the mindfulness begins to attune to that state, get familiar with that state, gets familiar with being mindful of that state. In my own experience with that very first exercise around anger, what I saw happening over the course of several months was that the mindfulness got more familiar with anger. Because it was becoming used to the anger, because the mindfulness was becoming interested in the anger and also familiar with it, the mind started waking up into the pattern earlier and earlier in the process.

You're familiar, I'm sure, with the way anger just cycles—it spins up, gets worse and worse. The first time I did this, I was in a full-blown rage by the time I recognized the anger. But over the course of several months, the mind began to get more familiar with being present with anger and began waking up earlier and earlier in the process. The mind wasn't in such a rage; it was more like normal anger.

And then at one point—this was a couple months into my exploration of mindfulness practice in daily life—I was just hanging out in my kitchen, doing stuff, and I saw a thought that would have led to anger had I not been mindful of it. In that moment, the mind was so attuned to anger, so attuned to the quality of anger, that it knew it was coming. And in the seeing of its potentiality—because it wasn't there yet—in the seeing of its potentiality, the mind let go. And it didn't get angry.

That was mind-blowing to me. That was a couple months into my practice, and I would say that was the moment I knew I would be practicing for the rest of my life. I could see the power of this practice to begin to reveal how these patterns are born.

So if you get lost into habitual mind states, be curious about what you're waking up into. That will attune the mind to that state, and it will help the mind to be able to wake up into that state more easily. It will help it to be able to be present for that state more easily.

The mind can also move into states where it is habitually not present. Spacing out, for instance. Spacing

out seems to be the quintessential state of mind in which mindfulness is not present. It's like—spaced out. How can mindfulness be aware of spacing out?

Sometimes we have a belief that certain states of mind are impossible to be mindful of. Spacing out might be one of those. And again, we may have a sense of trying to double down and hold on to the mindfulness, trying not to space out. This is just one example of this kind of state. There are others in which the mind seems unreachable—there's a lot in the terrain of spacing out, low energy, dullness, sleepiness, and restlessness sometimes, where it feels like the mind is just spinning so fast that it can't land on anything. How can I possibly be mindful of anything when the mind is spinning that fast? Obviously I need to slow it down. Or the spacing out—obviously I need to clear that up.

One of the key tools in my toolkit is that I have come to recognize that mindfulness can be mindful of anything. If there's something happening in my experience where there's any idea that I can't be mindful of that, I question it. I don't believe it. Instead I get curious. How might it be possible to be mindful of that? At times it can take a while to understand, because very often, like with something like spacing out, there can be a very strong habit of not being mindful in that state of mind.

One of the best ways to explore this, again, is the moment when you wake up after you've been lost. Often we notice the places that the mind gets lost in retrospect. You're going through your day and you're kind of present, and then you wake up and remember, "Oh, I was just not present." So it's in retrospect that we often notice. With habitual states of mind where we get lost, we'll wake up recognizing, "Oh, spaced out. I was lost and spaced out." And then because we have this belief that we can't be mindful of being spaced out, we try to do something in that moment. We try to clear up the spaced out, or we try to bring our attention to something and pay attention to it really clearly.

But sometimes the mind is simply spacing out.

I was having breakfast one morning and kept noticing the mind just going into spaced-out mode. Initially, my habit of practice was, "Okay, we're eating breakfast, pay attention to the breakfast. Lifting, chewing, tasting, swallowing." So I brought my attention back to that when I noticed I was spaced out. Initially I did that. But it kept happening, over and over again.

This is another great thing to note. If something happens over and over again like that, really get curious about it. Rather than getting frustrated—"How come I can't control my mind?"—be curious about what the mind is doing.

It kept doing it over and over again. At some point it was like, "Well, I guess trying to pay attention to the breakfast isn't doing it, so let me see if I can notice what the mind is doing instead." So I was paying attention to eating and then began to recognize this feeling of the mind. It was like the mind was here in front of me eating, and then it felt like the mind just took a break and went sitting up here somewhere, like hovering over my head. And I could actually follow that, be with that experience. When I allowed the

mind to do that, it felt very pleasant, actually. I was aware of this kind of buzzy, very relaxed state of mind. And in being in that state, what I recognized was that the mind was really tired. It was trying to take a break.

It was trying to relax. And I had kept trying to get it to do something, right? Pay attention to breakfast, pay attention to breakfast. But what was actually going on was that the mind needed a break. It needed rest.

And when I allowed it to rest with mindfulness—it was like, be aware, I watched the mind kind of go into that state, felt the buzziness of it—and at some point, all states are impermanent, it probably took thirty or forty seconds, the buzziness dissipated, and then the mind was very clear. It's like the mind took its rest, and that's what it needed to do.

Sometimes I find this exploration around curiosity more fruitful than thinking, "I know what's the best thing to be mindful of. I know it's best to be paying attention to breakfast, because that's what I'm doing, that's where I'm supposed to be paying attention." Instead of feeling like I have the right thing or I know what to do, be curious about what the mind is interested in paying attention to. Curious about that. In this case, exploring that territory, the mind took its rest and then was very present.

Sometimes we lose awareness as our practice deepens. This is counterintuitive in a way—we think that being more continuously mindful means we lose awareness less. But sometimes the very process and nature of the settling goes through periods where the mind wanders.

I'll describe this. One of the ways this happens is what I've called a purification cycle, where after a period of fairly continuous mindfulness, things that have not been seen for a while can come to the surface, and there's a kind of storm. So there's an alternation between periods of calm and quiet and a storm of something that hasn't really been allowed to be at the surface or allowed to be known before. That's one way this can happen as mindfulness settles.

Another way this can happen is that as the mind begins to settle down—and I'll give you the clue, the highlight, the sign or thing that I look for in this kind of situation—if there's been a period of time where the mindfulness has been fairly stable, I'm not saying one hundred percent stable, not one hundred percent present, but pretty continuous, a fair amount of ability to meet experience in the present moment, not so much reactivity, some amount of calm. If after a period like that, not too much getting lost, the mind suddenly starts to wander, get curious about that.

It often means that something isn't being seen. And a pattern that I've seen happen frequently enough in my practice that I've decided to talk about it, and that I hear enough in meetings with you that I've decided to talk about it, is that as the mind settles, it seems that the mind begins to get interested in things that our conscious awareness, what we know about—it's like beyond the scope of what we know about consciously. The mind starts getting interested in experience, phenomena, states that are not things we're familiar with.

I'll give an example of this. On one long retreat here at this center, I was at a place where for several days it was very easy to be present. I would sit down and the mindfulness was right there, right with the breath. And after a couple of days of that, I was like, "Oh great, I've figured it out." And then one morning, I sat down and the mind was just all over the place. Thoughts galore.

Fortunately, rather than trying to force myself to stay present, I got curious. What's happening? What am I not seeing? What is not seen here? And what I began to recognize is that I was paying attention to the breath, doing breath meditation, and within the space of half a breath, I would be right with the breath at the very beginning of an inhalation, I'd be right there. And within the space of half a breath, the breath would disappear. And that's when the thoughts would start.

The experience of what I was used to paying attention to in the breath, the sensations I was used to paying attention to—the mind was used to paying attention to a certain level and type of sensation. And then those sensations started to get more subtle. My habit of mindfulness was still looking around at that coarser level, and there wasn't much to find. So the mindfulness would go into thought.

This kind of thing happens as the mind settles down. Often the mind may start to be curious about or interested in something that we have never experienced before, don't even know about.

And if, again, we're trying to be in control—even at the subtlest level of trying to be in control, thinking "I'm going to pay attention to the breath in this way"—if we're trying to control that rather than being curious about what the mind is actually interested in paying attention to, we miss something important.

So if you see, after a period of fairly stable practice, that the mind starts to wander, often it's more of a drifting out of the present moment. It's not like the mind is charging out into emotional reactive storms. It's just that you're present, and then suddenly you're thinking about potato chips or baseball. The number of times I find myself thinking about something I know nothing about—people talking to me I've never met, discussing things I've never heard about or even been interested in. It's just this kind of drifting state.

If that's what's happening after a period of the mind settling, get curious about where it is that the mind is leaving. Another thing to explore is being attentive to the breath and noticing, "Ah, it's slipping out as the sensations get really subtle." Then as I saw that, I wondered, can I just be with that? At one point with Sayadaw U Pandita, I remember reporting to him that the breath was getting too subtle to pay attention to and I had to pay attention to something else. He said, "Just know that it's subtle. Just know that the sensations are subtle." And I was like, wow, what a revelation. So just recognizing, "Okay, sensations are quiet right now. Sensations are subtle right now"—that recognition can allow the mind to land on that.

There was another time I was exploring this question of seeing how mindfulness leaves or where it leaves. Again, I was doing breath meditation, and I had the agenda to be right with the breath. Every time I began to be right with the breath, I could see—and some of you may be able to start to see this at times—that the mindfulness was getting a little bit not so connected to the breath, becoming that more or less mindful

place around the breath.

As I saw that—so again, breath, mindfulness, like they were right together—I would notice the mindfulness losing touch with the breath. My original exploration around that was, "Oh, come back, be with the breath." I would notice the mindfulness losing touch and think, "Oh, come back, be with the breath." At some point, watching this happen multiple times, I got curious. It was like, "Oh, the mind is leaving the breath. Wow, but I'm mindful of that. Let's see where it wants to go."

Instead of having the agenda that I think I know what the best thing to do is—that very focused attention—what I saw was that the mind let go of the breath and opened into a much more broad, receptive space, as opposed to a focused, directed mindfulness. It was a space I had never experienced before. I had never explored or touched into that. And I began to understand it through watching the mind do what it was doing. Mindfulness was leaving the breath. Just, "Oh, let's see. I'm aware of that. Let's see where it wants to go. I'm mindful. Let's see where it wants to go."

We often have an idea, I think based on some familiarity we have, about what it feels like when mindfulness starts getting stronger. Our first few tastes of mindfulness getting stronger may happen on retreat, may happen when we're slowed down. We see things in a particular way, things are really clear, we're seeing things very sharply, precisely, we're seeing a lot more detail. And we get the idea that that's what mindfulness is. So we may have that sense of what mindfulness is, and then what we do is we try to construct that. We try to find that state. Even when we're already mindful, we try to find that state.

I did this on one retreat. I was practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, and I was exploring a lot of different ways the mind paid attention, so that may be why this began to be clear to me. As I was doing some walking meditation and then walked back to my dorm where I was doing sitting meditation in my room, I noticed that the mind was trying to put itself into a state of mind in order to meditate. And in that doing, I recognized—wait a minute, I'm already mindful. What's wrong with this state?

What's wrong with this state?

And what I saw was that the idea was that I needed to subtly repress thoughts. The state that the mind was trying to put itself in was a state of repressing thoughts.

So one exploration around mindfulness again here, this topic of investigating mindfulness: if I'm trying to change the state of my mind in order to be mindful, ask if that's necessary. I ask myself, is that necessary? Very often it's already mindful.

And again, there are so many different ways that mindfulness can be experienced. Sometimes it has that really precise, very clear quality—like you're seeing all this detail. Sometimes mindfulness feels so ordinary. You wake up in the morning and it's just so completely ordinary. I remember this happening on one three-month course. I woke up in the morning and thought, wow, I just feel so ordinary. And I had to check: am I being mindful? It just seemed like it was so ordinary.

Sometimes it can feel really ordinary. Sometimes it can feel really broad and vast and open. Sometimes it can feel very precise and directed.

Check the awareness. Are you aware? Are you aware? And be curious about what awareness is already aware of. Let go of any idea that it's supposed to be a certain way, and that will guide you to see so much that you could never even possibly conceive of.

We cannot find our way to the unknown by being with things we know. We have to allow ourselves to open to the unknown, to things we're not familiar with, being aware in ways we're not familiar with.

So I'm hoping this is encouraging you to be curious about exploring your mindfulness, exploring your experience. The curiosity, the factor of curiosity, is so helpful. And there's so much to learn.

As we explore this quality of mindfulness and it begins to become more continuous—which this exploration does—we see our own minds. We see how our minds get caught, how they get lost. And we also start to see just the processes of mind, the ways it works, the aggregates. We start to see how our minds function.

We don't have to create anything special to be mindful of. The five aggregates are happening all the time. Any moment we wake up and can just be with what's here begins to point us to the wisdom of impermanence, unreliability, not-self.

And curiosity—curiosity about this—be willing to go, be willing to let the mind point some things out to you. Sometimes it knows things that we don't consciously know.

Let's just sit for a minute.

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