The Disappearance and Reappearance of Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:22

We've been spending much of our time here exploring and being aware of our experience. Tonight I'd like to reflect with you about mindfulness from a different perspective—not in terms of focusing on what we're aware of, but rather on mindfulness itself. Investigating mindfulness itself. Taking an interest in the coming and going of mindfulness.

Mindfulness as a factor of mind sometimes appears, sometimes disappears. We usually call this appearance and disappearance of mindfulness the wandering mind. I thought of turning this around. Rather than exploring how our mind gets lost, let's explore the factor of mindfulness and how it disappears and how it reappears.

We can actually do this. And this exploration, I think, supports us in a kind of disidentification with the act of mindfulness itself. We often identify with being the one who does mindfulness. Exploring how mindfulness comes and goes can help to begin to unhook us from the identification with the doing of mindfulness.

There's a lot we can learn in this exploration of how mindfulness appears and disappears. We can learn about how we get hooked, where we get out of balance. We also get a really clear recognition of just how out of control the mind is.

We sit down to meditate. We're going to be mindful. That's our intention. I will be mindful. And how long does that last? The mind wanders. We actually have very little control over that. We have a modicum—a small, tiny little bit of control when we are mindful. But there's a lot of habits, a lot of conditioning that tends to pull us away. Much of that comes from a subconscious realm. While we are sitting here trying to be mindful, our mind has other ideas about the matter.

And then there is how long we're lost for. We have no say over how long we're going to be gone. We have no say about when mindfulness comes back. Mindfulness comes back—who did that? You didn't decide, "Oh, I'm going to be mindful now." Mindfulness appears spontaneously.

This exploration around the coming and going of mindfulness really helps to point out just how out of control our minds are. And this is a pointer to the Buddhist teaching on anattā, not-self—this out-of-control nature of experience. The Buddha, in one of his key teachings on not-self, pointed to this aspect of our experience being out of our control as evidence for understanding the not-self nature of our

experience. He said, "If consciousness were self, it would be possible to say of consciousness, 'May my consciousness be thus. May my consciousness not be thus.' But consciousness is not self, and so it is not possible to say, 'May my consciousness be thus. May my consciousness not be thus.'"

Likewise for states of perception, feeling, body—all of the states of mind that we go through. There's some level of choice from time to time that we have, but largely when we look at our minds as we are here, we really get it. There's not a lot of control. This is part of this exploration. We really start to see the out-of-control, not-self nature of our minds.

This can be unsettling, disturbing, frustrating, confusing. And so I'd like to offer this exploration with an attitude of compassion, of friendliness, of curiosity. Rather than judgment, what can we learn about our minds? What can we understand about our minds? As I said in the talk on the hindrances, the understanding—not an intellectual understanding, but an understanding that comes through meeting experience and seeing directly our experience—that understanding brings wisdom to our minds, which begins to replace the habitual conditioned patterns of our mind.

And so rather than habitually acting out of our conditioned patterns from childhood, or the patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion, our actions begin to be motivated from wisdom. It's still not self. It's still not me or I. And yet the whole process of the unfolding of our practice as wisdom develops through this direct experience is to move towards the letting go of that conditioning that ties us to suffering.

Another aspect of this exploration of mindfulness is to learn about awareness itself. As we explore the comings and goings of mindfulness and get interested in how the mind pays attention—interested in mindfulness itself—we start to learn not only about awareness, but about the functioning of the mind, how the mind works. All of this exploration brings wisdom, brings understanding to the mind, which helps to free us from those conditioned tendencies.

The first place this exploration began to unfold for me, in my own experience, was looking at essentially the comings of mindfulness—the times it re-arises. This happens countless times in the day. We're sitting here, our minds wander, and at some point, nothing that we choose to do, mindfulness returns. That moment of mindfulness returning is a really great moment. Not just because we're no longer lost, but because there's a possibility there of beginning to get familiar with what it feels like to be mindful.

This kind of spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness is one form of mindfulness that happens to us. The Abhidhamma calls this unprompted mindfulness. It arises without conscious choice, without conscious prompting. It arises without our consciously doing it. It happens spontaneously.

The other form of mindfulness is what we typically practice and think of as our practice: prompted mindfulness. This is where we're already mindful and we remind ourselves to be mindful. That kind of mindfulness is what we're most familiar with in terms of the feeling of what it means to be mindful. Often it includes a kind of choice about what we're paying attention to, and I hope to talk about that a little more

later.

Unprompted mindfulness arises spontaneously, and we're not choosing what the mind is paying attention to. The mindfulness is just re-arising and it's already paying attention to something. Mindfulness always arises with some experience happening along with it. And in that moment, what we tend to do is get involved with the thing that we are mindful of.

We may be walking down the hill to the dining hall, maybe a little spaced out, in that more or less mindful place that Joseph describes. There's a kind of rustle on the side of the road and our attention's drawn to it. There's a brief coming out of whatever lostness we've been in, and we turn our attention—but then we get involved with what we've turned our attention to. It's a bullfrog by the side of the road. We get interested in looking at the bullfrog and thinking about bullfrogs. There's been just a little moment of coming back, of recognizing, of knowing experience for a split second, but then we tend to get involved again.

Beginning to cultivate this recognition of that moment of waking up is important, because actually that kind of moment happens a lot in our day—where we're kind of lost and then something happens and we are aroused a little bit out of our lostness, but then get sucked back into whatever we've become aware of.

If we get interested in this experience of mindfulness coming back, interested in the quality of mindfulness—what is it for mindfulness to return?—it's kind of amazing. In that moment when we go from being lost to being aware, what I discovered in my own exploration was that there can be a clearer recognition of what it means to be mindful, what the experience of mindfulness itself is. There's a kind of contrast in that moment between what it was like a few moments ago to be lost in thought and what it's like now to be aware. So the experience of mindfulness itself, the feeling of mindfulness, the quality of mindfulness is highlighted in that moment—if we are interested in exploring it, if we're interested in being aware of it.

There are a couple of great things about this kind of exploration. The first is that it begins to create a sense of familiarity for us about the feeling of mindfulness, what it is to be aware. And that very familiarity—what we're doing there is being mindful of mindfulness. We're recognizing the quality of mindfulness itself. So we're getting familiar with that: what does it feel like to be mindful? And that very familiarity begins to help us see it happening more often. Because that moment of remembering, that moment when mindfulness re-arises, actually happens way more often than we're consciously aware of. It happens and then we're lost again, for a split second, and we're lost again. The more familiar we get with that feeling of mindfulness, the more those moments when mindfulness re-arises spontaneously become available to us.

begin to kind of point themselves out to us because we're familiar with them.

And so this practice begins to pull a thread of mindfulness through the non-formal times of practice. There are so many moments of mindfulness coming back like that.

Another wonderful aspect of this exploration is that the moment of mindfulness returning is completely effortless. It doesn't take any work on your part for that moment to happen. And if we can connect to that quality of effortless awareness present in that moment, it gives us a pointer to the possibility—it shows us a little bit about what it might be like to be mindful without trying so hard. Just in that split second of mindfulness coming back, it's a light, completely effortless moment.

Another helpful thing for me about this practice was that it really cut the tendency to judge the fact that my mind wandered. Because what we often do in that moment, especially in sitting meditation, when mindfulness returns, is think, "Again! My mind wandered again." But if we are curious about the re-arising of mindfulness, what I began to feel was: it doesn't matter if my mind wanders a hundred times during a sitting—that gives me a hundred opportunities to look at that effortless mindfulness. Just turn it around. Rather than being frustrated about the mind getting lost, be interested in exploring the mind coming back, the re-arising of mindfulness.

It's very simple in that moment. This isn't exactly something to do—it's not something you can actually make happen, because in that moment of the spontaneous arising of mindfulness your mind will do what it's doing. So it's not exactly an instruction where I can say, "Do this." Rather, this is the kind of instruction where you put an intention in your mind. Just drop in: May I be aware when mindfulness returns. And when mindfulness returns and you find yourself judging yourself—"Oh, right, okay, well here I am, let's check in what's going on"—just remind yourself, and try again. Keep this intention to check into that moment.

On one retreat where I began to explore this moment of the arising of mindfulness, my mind got curious about how early I could notice the re-arising of mindfulness. Of course that's not something I could do deliberately. But that very curiosity began to investigate the phenomenon in its own way. So inclining towards curiosity is more how this practice will unfold.

In that moment when you remember—if you remember—it's simply recognizing that you are aware. The first thing is to recognize that you are aware. And then just notice what's obvious. Awareness is aware of something in that moment. There's awareness, and something that awareness is aware of. Just notice that.

Then, depending on what practice you're doing, that very awareness of the arising of mindfulness and the knowing of a tickle, or the knowing of peace, or the knowing of frustration—whatever it is that mindfulness is arising into—it may simply be that that's enough. The mind has connected back again with experience and you're present. No need to choose an object. And yet if you're doing a form of concentration practice, with the breath or with metta, in that moment, because you are now aware again, prompted mindfulness is possible. So you can choose an object if that's appropriate.

It's also possible to make this exploration around what it feels like to be mindful. For me at least, the arising of mindfulness was probably the easiest place to get familiar with that feeling of awareness or mindfulness itself.

Just one note: I'm going to be using the terms mindfulness and awareness synonymously in this talk. Some teachers don't really define the term awareness, and sometimes teachers use it in different ways. I'll just tell you straight out—when I say awareness here, I mean mindfulness, just to keep the confusion at a minimum.

So when you are mindful, when awareness is present, you can also check in. What is it like to be aware? For me, that moment when mindfulness returns was the clearest place to get a sense of that, because of the contrast between being lost and being present. But we can also begin to check into this in the moments of just the flow of our awareness, of our mindfulness, whatever we're paying attention to.

Right now, do you know that you're aware? If you are alert enough to hear me ask the question, the answer is probably yes. In fact, the answer is yes—you know that you're aware. What it is to be aware can be kind of mysterious. We don't actually really know what it means sometimes. It's not so clear to us. We know that we're aware, but we don't know what awareness is.

We don't know the feeling of mindfulness itself. It's such a familiar experience, so close to how our minds work, that it's kind of like the air we breathe. It's not something that's easy to recognize.

And yet, what I've seen is that just that kind of recognition—"Do I know that I'm aware? Yes, I know that I'm aware"—that simple recognition begins, over time, to help us understand what that experience of awareness itself is. That experience of mindfulness itself.

So another part of this exploration—I've been talking mostly here about the waking up side of the equation. It's also possible to get curious about where mindfulness gets lost. At one point I was in a sitting group and somebody said something like, "Well, I don't see how it's possible to see when mindfulness goes away. It's either there or it's not." In my own exploration of this, I began to see that actually it is possible to recognize where awareness gets lost. So there's a curiosity about what situations, what mind states—how and when awareness gets lost.

I'm going to go through some of them now, just an exploration of some of the ways I've seen awareness get lost in my own practice. Again, this isn't intended as a judgment. The exploration here isn't to notice where your mind gets lost and beat yourself up about that. It's to notice where your mind gets lost and get interested in it, get curious about that.

We might lose awareness or tend to find ourselves losing awareness in particular activities—our yogi job, washing dishes, eating, using the toilet, going to our rooms, or walking in the hills as opposed to doing formal walking practice. Just begin to see where mindfulness tends to get lost for longer periods of time. You go into your room and close the door and the mind kind of goes, "Phew, okay, don't need to be mindful here." So notice that, notice that tendency.

On one retreat I found—well, actually what often tends to happen with this exploration of noticing where awareness gets lost is that we're not actually seeing the mind going out. We're not seeing the mind leaving

the present moment. What we notice is that the mind has come back after a while and we know, "Oh yeah, I've been in my room now for ten minutes and haven't been very mindful." We recognize it kind of late in the game.

So on one retreat I began to recognize that I would come back into awareness in the bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror. And it's like, "Wow, how did that happen?" This happened repeatedly enough that the awareness would return while I was staring at myself in the mirror. I didn't even notice that I was standing at the sink, much less looking at myself in the mirror.

So I began to get curious about that. If you notice an area or a place where mindfulness tends to get lost, you can add a little bit of curiosity. I would know that I was headed into the bathroom—"Oh, I'm headed into the bathroom. Maybe I'll see this time where awareness gets lost"—and go into the bathroom and then find myself staring at myself in the mirror again. "Okay, missed it again." Using a lightness. "Wow, look at that. Amazing." *Emaho* is the word the Tibetans use. *Emaho*—amazing. Amazing what the mind does.

So just the curiosity about it. And it took a while for me—every time I'd go into the bathroom it was like, "Yeah, maybe I'll see it this time." At one point I was pretty present through being in the bathroom and I was standing at the sink and it's like, "Oh, I'm standing at the sink. I know I'm standing at the sink." And then I saw the intention to look up at my face. It wasn't like some deep childhood pattern of needing to be seen. It was just a habit of looking at myself in the mirror that wasn't seen, just an unseen habit.

So that's another thing I'd like to throw out there.

Sometimes we put interpretations on our experience. We think, "Gosh, if I always get lost when I'm looking at myself in the mirror, it must mean something significant." So just notice where you get lost, and then get curious about how it happens, what happens there. Add a little interest to the exploration.

The point is not to stop the activity. Certainly I couldn't stop going into the bathroom. Sometimes you might think, "Oh, if I find myself getting lost taking a walk in the hills, maybe I shouldn't do the walk in the hills." That's not what I'm suggesting here. I'm suggesting that when you're getting ready to take a walk in the hills, get curious about how that getting lost happens. How does it happen?

Joseph Goldstein tells a story about himself—how when he would go into the dining hall, he found himself just getting lost. Every time he went into the dining hall, he got lost. And his exploration of that was as soon as he walked into the dining hall, he began recognizing: seeing is happening. He noticed, he recognized, that what was happening was his awareness was going out the eye door. It was the seeing that was pulling him out. And so he began to simply recognize: seeing is happening in this situation.

We can begin to expand the terrain, the field, the places where we are aware, by noticing where we lose awareness.

We also might lose awareness in states of body—either pleasant states or unpleasant states. Those would probably be the two main places we'd lose our awareness. If the body starts feeling really comfortable, the sensations of sleep arising, the pleasant experience that happens as the mind goes to sleep—the mind can get lost in that. The mind can kind of just hook into the pleasantness and lose touch with the awareness of the pleasantness. So exploring the feeling tone that Greg was talking about this morning becomes important—being consciously aware of pleasant quality or unpleasant quality.

Pain is another place where we tend to get lost. The mind tends to kind of go out. And again, the point isn't to force yourself to stay with an experience like a pain in the knee or a pain in the back, but rather to be curious about what does the mind do when pain is happening? There's the pain, there's the aversion, and then—poof—the mind is gone.

One thing I noticed is that a lot of times with pain, my mind had various strategies. I would wake up, for instance, in some kind of fantasy or singing a song in my mind. And in that waking up, I recognized: wow, in this moment, the mind is not really bothered by the pain. And so I got curious about that. Seeing that the mind had a strategy—sometimes our minds have strategies for how to deal with pain. Rather than trying to force ourselves to just hold in and grip and stay with the pain, get curious about those strategies.

When I began exploring the singing strategy, what I noticed was that in the singing strategy, the mind had kind of let go of its grip on the pain. It had let go of "this is a problem, this is something that needs to be fixed or controlled or changed." And the mind was just happily off singing its song. When the mind woke up into that and noticed both the singing and that it wasn't stuck, wasn't fastened to the pain, it began to understand a little bit about how that unpleasant experience could be there without aversion.

This is one of the questions from this morning: How can that unpleasant experience be there without aversion? That strategy of singing was one way to get there. It's possible to actually have that unpleasant experience arise without that grip.

So exploring that back and forth—exploring how the mind would go into that strategy of singing and lose its grip, then in the re-arising of mindfulness seeing the lack of the fastening or gripping to the pain—there were a few moments where there was just the pain and no aversion. And then the aversion arose. The grip arose. So I got to see the grip arising itself. And noticing, just the exploration of that, began to lessen the need for the strategy of singing, because the mind could see that the grip would kind of come and go. The mind could just be present for that.

We also might lose awareness in states of mind—particular familiar states of mind. Perhaps boredom, frustration, depression, planning. We all may have our particular familiar ways the mind tends to get lost. It's really helpful to begin to recognize the particular patterns. Guy talked about this the other day—recognizing the top ten ways our mind gets lost.

The moment that mindfulness comes back into those states—so the mind is wandering off and you wake

up recognizing the thought and perhaps the state associated with it, planning or confusion or boredom, or maybe peace or ease (we can actually get lost in those kinds of states of mind also)—in the moment of waking up, of having mindfulness re-arise into a state of mind, the familiarity with that state begins to build, much like I was describing with mindfulness itself. It helps us become familiar with it.

At one point early in my practice, one of the main explorations I was doing was around anger. When I first started exploring this, the mind was pretty angry by the time it remembered that it was going to be paying attention to anger. The mind was pretty much in a rage. At that point it was like, "Wow, okay. Oh, anger. Yep, I said I'd be aware of this. Yep, oh boy, unpleasant." So it was about that level of awareness.

But that interest in exploring that pattern—this was a way my mind just took off. I would find myself frozen in anger, unable to even function. So I was curious: Is there some way that mindfulness can infiltrate this pattern?

Each time the mind woke up recognizing, "Oh, this is anger, this is what anger feels like"—I didn't have to do anything, this is just what unfolded. Over the course of months, each time I woke up I recognized that the anger wasn't as bad. It hadn't spun into rage by now. The mindfulness was picking up on the anger sooner, and I think this was because of the familiarity the mind had gained with it, and also the familiarity the mind had gained with the suffering of that anger. Because the mind really got it: anger doesn't feel good.

So the arising of awareness into the state of anger kind of backed up. I began to see just more like normal anger, and then waking up into just the beginnings of anger. And one time, actually seeing the inclination towards anger—seeing the mind want to get angry. That one kind of blew my mind. Why would the mind want to get angry? But seeing that, seeing the mind want to get angry, the mind also recognized from the months of having paid attention to anger: that way lies suffering. And again, I did not have to do this. The mind just let go of that intention towards anger.

This exploration of getting familiar with states of mind we get lost in—just a simple familiarity, in a moment, "Yep, there it is, there's depression, there's boredom, there's frustration"—that simple recognition begins to help the mind see it more quickly, even to the point where it may start to see it arise. And then we may not get lost in the state.

We also might lose awareness as our practice deepens. There are a couple different ways this happens, I think. As our mind settles down, becomes more still, more quiet, sometimes things that we have held at bay through conscious repression or even subconscious repression... it's like the loosening of the usual structures of our mind, the ways we hold things in. The mind begins to loosen like that, and some old deep patterns can just kind of erupt. It's as if they're saying, "Oh, finally there's some space for me to be seen. Thank you."

This practice can be an alternation of what Michelle McDonald has called the cycle between purity and

purification—the settling into the space of calm and ease and peace, the purity of mind, and then purification. The purification is the allowing into consciousness or the coming into consciousness of habits and patterns that we've held inside.

Mindfulness functions similarly to how I spoke the other day about metta practice, how metta kind of functions like soap in the washing machine. The soap draws the dirt to it, pulls it out of the clothes into the water. It's similar with mindfulness practice. This purification part is where mindfulness is like the soap, pulling to the surface those things that are counter to the purity—those states of greed, of aversion, of confusion. It pulls them into consciousness, and that coming into consciousness is where they can be released.

It's not a mistake, this alternation between purity and purification. It's actually part of how the practice works.

And so, as the mind settles down, we may find suddenly there's an explosion of the mind going back into something that happened when we were ten—some memory that triggers a whole host of feelings. We might get lost in that for a while. When that kind of thing happens, when the purification starts to happen, we sometimes feel, "What did I do wrong? What happened to my beautiful, calm, settled mindfulness?"

It's just this purity-purification cycle. A sense of knowing that this is the way the practice unfolds really helped me to not be so judgmental about those eruptions.

Another way the mind can start getting lost as the practice deepens is this: as the mind settles down into more states of calm and clarity, sometimes experiences arise that are not very familiar, or experience gets more subtle. I've seen this pattern quite a bit—to the point now where if, after a period of the mind being settled, the mind starts to wander, I get curious about it.

The purity-purification cycle is pretty easy to recognize because we tend to be in story, in strong emotion. But this other kind of mind wandering—when there's something new happening, something unfamiliar, the mind touching into more subtlety—it tends to be that you're just really present, things are going quite well, and suddenly you wake up ten minutes later thinking, "Where did the mindfulness go?"

When this first started to happen to me, I thought I was doing something wrong. And then I began to get interested in where the mindfulness was going.

One of the first times this happened, I was paying attention to the breath. For a couple of days—this was on a three-month course at IMS—the mind had been pretty settled with the breath. I'd sit down and the mind would be right there with the breath. Just right there. Then one morning I sat down and within a second the mind was wandering. "What happened to my mindfulness?"

At that point, I was more curious about it rather than judging myself. So what I explored was: okay, here I am, I'm mindful. Let's see if I can notice where mindfulness gets lost.

The mind was attending to the breath. As I was being with the breath, I noticed that the sensations of the breath got very, very quiet. Within the space of one in-breath and one out-breath, the breath almost disappeared. There wasn't much to pay attention to, and the mind got lost.

When I noticed that—that the breath was disappearing, that there were no sensations—I understood what was happening. The mind was used to paying attention to a particular level of sensation. Then the level of sensation got more subtle. And the mind was still looking at the grosser level, not finding anything there, and wandered off.

Often, as the mind settles, sensations get quieter. There are also sometimes unfamiliar states of mind that begin to arise. And as these unfamiliar states happen, the mind can get lost.

What I'd like to encourage here is curiosity. If your mind has been settled and it suddenly starts to wander, rather than judging it as something wrong—rather than thinking you need to try harder—get curious. In that case with the breath, I found that paying attention to the subtlety required that I actually not try so hard. The effort to be mindful was in the way of seeing the sensations. When the mindfulness backed off that intensity of effort—oh, there's the breath again.

The meditation itself sometimes shows us how to deepen. And sometimes that doorway is revealed to us through the wandering mind. It's paradoxical, but I've seen it happen so many times that I want you to know about it.

The mind can also get lost in states where it holds the opinion that it's not possible to be mindful. Low energy, sleepiness, sloth and torpor, dullness, spacing out—that's like the quintessential example. "The mind is spaced out; it's not possible to be mindful of that."

It is possible to be mindful of spacing out.

The way into this kind of exploration, again, is through that recognition on waking up, on the re-arising of mindfulness. Mindfulness re-arises into some kind of space—like spacing out. In that moment you recognize, "Oh, I'm spaced out." And what we typically do there is say, "Come back." But in that arising of mindfulness, mindfulness has already arisen connected with that spaced-out state.

Can you touch into that? Can you be aware of that? Actually, the fact that mindfulness has re-arisen within that spaced-out state indicates yes, it is possible to be aware in that spaced-out state. But the view, the opinion that "spaced out equals not mindful, have to do something"—that's our typical approach. We bring our mind to some other object. We bring our mind to the breath, to the body.

One time I really began to see this. I was eating breakfast, and I had the agenda while eating to be mindful of the experience of eating—the movement of the hand, the lifting, the chewing, the swallowing, the tasting, all of that. I was trying to pay attention, bringing my attention to that. So that was a directing of attention, the prompted mindfulness directing attention to the meal. And then the mind would space out. I

noticed that and brought my attention back to breakfast. That was what I was doing. That was my understanding of what it means to be mindful here: pay attention to breakfast.

At some point, I began to see the mind kind of leave the conscious focus on breakfast and move into spaced out. It felt like the mind was hanging out up here somewhere in a buzzing state. And rather than in that moment saying, "Let me bring myself back to something else," it was kind of like, "Oh, the mindfulness is actually aware of that state." Let's hang out here. Let's see what this is like. I'm mindful. This mindfulness is here. Why not?

So paying attention to that state itself, there was a recognition that actually the mind was resting. The mind actually needed some rest. And the mindfulness of that state kind of allowed that rest. Within thirty seconds or a minute or something like that—it didn't take very long—that state ended. And then I was present with whatever else was arising in my experience.

So again, I mentioned this with the hindrances, but just to reinforce it: if there's any state where you think you can't be mindful, question that. If you have enough awareness to know, "Oh, this state—I can't be mindful here," there's some mindfulness of it. See if you can kind of push the edges of that, where mindfulness can go. A lot of this talk I'm exploring what are the boundaries, what are the edges of where mindfulness can go. Begin to push the edges of that. See, can mindfulness begin to infiltrate the areas where we think it can't go or where it's habitually not arising?

We also often seem to think we have to be in a certain state to meditate, that the mind has to be in a certain kind of meditative state. I don't know what your meditative state is. Sometimes we have a sense of—I think this comes from familiarity with certain states that are particularly clear in our mindfulness practice. We get a sense of, "Wow, just seeing the arising of experience so clearly, a really clear sense of presence in a particular way." And we think, "That's it. That is what mindfulness is about. That is what I'm looking for." And then we try to recreate it. We try to find it.

What we can begin to see, what we can begin to recognize, is that there are many different ways you can feel when mindfulness is continuous or present. Sometimes it can feel really clear. Sometimes it can feel like the mind is broad and vast, taking in a kind of panoramic experience. Sometimes it can feel like the mind is precisely focused on one thing—just right there, clear—and then that thing disappears and another thing arises and the mind is right there.

Sometimes it can feel like there's no place the mindfulness can land—everything vanishing even as we see it.

So many different ways that experience can unfold. What this reveals is that mindfulness is attuning to different kinds of experiences. We tend to look for a particular state, a particular way of mindfulness, a particular kind of experience that we think *is* mindfulness. And that very looking for mindfulness to be a certain way will obscure the way it actually is now. How is it now?

I was once on a retreat in Burma, doing some walking meditation, and I'd been pretty present in the walking. But as I walked back to my dorm, I noticed my mind trying to put itself into some kind of special meditative state. I was getting ready to go to my room to sit, and I saw my mind try to put itself into a state in order to meditate in a specific way. Seeing that, it was almost amusing. It's like, why are you doing that? What's wrong with this state? Awareness is here. Let's be with this.

I saw that happen several times—the mind trying to put itself into a state in order to meditate. And what I saw was that it was a subtle repression of thought. The mind had attributed or decided somehow that that space where there wasn't so much thought was a better place to meditate from.

My hope here primarily is that you'll be interested—that this may encourage some interest in exploring the edges of your practice. Where you get lost, how you get lost. And to not have a sense that this is a problem at all. There's so much we can learn from exploring the places where mindfulness goes and from where mindfulness comes back. It's a huge place of learning for us.

Not only do we learn about our habits of mind—sometimes I call this kind of practice "Your Mind 101," getting familiar with your patterns of mind—we also begin to get familiar with what we might call "The Mind 101." The patterns or ways that our minds work, the ways our minds feel things, the conditioned nature of experience, the way it responds to pleasant and unpleasant. Things that we share as human beings. We also begin to see these insights into impermanence, unreliability, and not-self. This exploration takes us into that terrain as well.

And the understanding, the wisdom that grows from that—that is what frees us. We can't free our own minds. It's not a doing. We cultivate the conditions. The learning, the wisdom grows, and the wisdom allows the letting go.

So let's sit together for a moment.

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