Exploring the Edges of the Wandering Mind

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As we practice looking at our experience, noticing what's arising and exploring what we find, it can be useful at times to begin recognizing patterns that happen—things that occur over and over again—and to become curious about those patterns. What can we learn from them?

There's one pattern that we all share. I'm quite sure this is one we all experience all day long, over and over again: the wandering mind. Mindfulness gets lost into something or other, and then we wake up.

At some point I began to explore and get interested in this pattern itself, not necessarily its particular manifestations, but just this phenomenon of the wandering mind. I found that I could reframe it for myself—not as wandering mind, but as basically the coming and going of mindfulness. The investigation around the wandering mind is really an investigation around mindfulness itself. Being curious about this quality of mindfulness: What is it? What is the experience of mindfulness? How can we recognize it? Can that recognition support us in cultivating the quality of mindfulness? How can we encourage its continuity? It seems to me there's a lot we can learn in this particular investigation.

One of the most obvious things we can learn, if we're simply curious about this, is that we may begin to recognize patterns within that pattern of wandering mind. We may begin to recognize particular ways we get caught, becoming familiar with our own versions of where we tend to really struggle.

Another aspect we can begin to recognize in exploring mindfulness itself is that we may have certain beliefs about mindfulness, certain beliefs about the practice that are actually getting in our way.

We also start to see a connection to some very deep truths—the deep truth of not-self evident in this pattern of wandering mind. We sit down determined: I'm going to pay attention. I'm going to be present. And yet the mind wanders. Did you decide to make it wander? Probably not. That's a manifestation of the uncontrollability of the mind, the not-self nature of the mind.

Mindfulness itself is a conditioned pattern. It arises based on conditions; it ceases based on conditions. It is not I, it is not me, it is not mine. One paraphrase of a text from the Buddha says something along the lines of: mindfulness is not self. Mindfulness is a mental formation, and this quote is about mental formations, so I'll put mindfulness in there. Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were self, it would be possible to say of mindfulness, "May my mindfulness be thus. May my mindfulness not be thus." But mindfulness is not self, so it is not possible to say of mindfulness, "May my mindfulness be thus." You don't have that control.

There are ways we can encourage and cultivate the conditions for mindfulness, support its increase, but

we can't choose how long it will stay necessarily. And when it disappears, when it vanishes—in some ways even more amazing—the mind is off wandering, fantasizing, arguing, reflecting, remembering, and suddenly we're back. Who did that?

This exploration around the wandering mind begins to really dive in pretty deeply. We can also begin to learn about mindfulness itself, the experience of mindfulness. What is it like to be mindful? We know at times—I think the emphasis in many forms of meditation is to be interested in the objects, in what the experience is when we're mindful. So often we're more oriented towards the qualities of the experience itself: the hardness, the softness, the pulsing of the body; color and form in sight; pitch and tone in hearing; the qualities of our mind states.

And this is one of the ways in which we can begin to cultivate a stability of mindfulness—to be attentive to experience itself. But in that, we may be missing a possibility to be curious about mindfulness. Mindfulness is a quality of the mind and can be recognized. And so this is the part of the exploration I'd like to offer this evening.

The other night in introducing Right Mindfulness, I gave some simple definitions such as being present, being aware, knowing what's happening while it's happening. But Right Mindfulness is oriented in a particular direction with a particular perspective that is especially interested in understanding suffering. It is interested in human experience as human experience—just the simplicity of "this is what's arising." We talked about that the other day, this mindfulness that brings in a kind of non-judgmental, non-reactive aspect, an allowing, receptive quality to this ability to know that we know.

There's an aspect of our minds, a functioning of our minds, that in my own experience early on in my practice—maybe even for the first ten years or so—there was some confusion around. I confused the quality or factor of attention with the quality of mindfulness. These two got mixed up for me. And so this is one piece I want to start with before we move into this exploration around the wandering mind: to point to this quality of attention in our minds and to talk a little bit about how it's different from mindfulness.

For myself, early in my practice, I used to think that if I wasn't consciously choosing to pay attention to an object, if I wasn't in control of where the attention was, it meant I wasn't being mindful. That's a fundamental misunderstanding.

The factor of attention—and we can see this in everyday life, we can recognize it—attention is a factor of mind that picks experience out of the multiplicity of things that could be known. It picks something to attend to. Attention lands on some particular experience. So the factor of attention is this selecting of experience out of the field of possible experiences. There are millions of things probably that could come into our attention, that could be connected with in a moment. And some aspect of our conditioning points us to some particular experience to pay attention to.

Now that choosing, that attending to something in this very pure definition of attention, does not have to be something we're consciously doing. And we can see this in daily life—how attention functions—and can see that attention and mindfulness are different.

A simple example: perhaps there was a time when you recognized that you walked down the hill to go to the dining hall and got halfway through putting food on your plate, and then realized you'd been completely lost in thought. Unaware really of the walking down the hill or putting food on your plate until that moment when mindfulness returned. In that moment of mindfulness returning and the recognition that the mind had been lost, we can see that something was paying attention. Some part of our mind was attending to the walk down the hill, or we would have just been running into other people and falling off the edge of the path. We wouldn't have been able to put food on our plate without having some attention. And so attention can be there without mindfulness. And attention can be there without our choosing it.

There's this factor of attention—the mind can aim at something. And that factor of attention is amenable to what we could call, in familiar terms, conscious choice. We can, with a sense of agency, choose to pay attention. We can sit down and choose to pay attention to the breath for a certain period of time. We can't be there for the entire sitting probably, but we can direct, aim, our attention to an experience. So that's the factor of attention where we are choosing to pay attention.

And this is where I think mindfulness and attention get a little confused, at least in my experience. Because of the instructions—"pick something to pay attention to"—I felt like if I wasn't picking that thing to pay attention to, then I wasn't being mindful.

But then as I began to practice more and really began to explore open awareness, I became more curious about settling back, not consciously choosing what to pay attention to, but allowing the conditions of experience to choose what to pay attention to. This is one way to describe open awareness. We settle back. We've described it in a familiar way: settle back and receive experience. You don't have to pick an experience; you can just settle back and notice what comes to you. In that coming to you, that is essentially conditions from our past, our conditioning, aiming our attention in some way. And we are consciously not choosing what to pay attention to.

Sometimes in the open awareness practice, where we are stepped back and receiving and not aiming at a particular anchor, one way to describe it would be following the attention. The attention will shift from object to object, and we might be able to stay connected to where that attention shifts.

I described this experience of following the attention to my teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. And he got very excited and said, "Oh yes, yes, it's just like walking a dog! You have a dog on a leash, and that dog will go off here and smell this thing and that thing, and it's just jumping all over the place. But you've got it on the leash, so it's not going to go too far. That's your job—just to hold on to the leash."

So it's kind of like surfing or riding where the attention goes.

Although it doesn't always necessarily feel smooth—it doesn't always feel like a smooth shift from thing to thing. Sometimes it can feel more jumpy, as attention pops from thing to thing. And so mindfulness can be aware of this shifting attention. This is an aspect that comes into play as we begin to explore the wandering mind, because essentially, when the mind wanders, the attention has picked up on something. The attention has gotten interested in something. Conditions have directed the attention to something, and we haven't noticed that. Mindfulness hasn't noticed that. The mind wanders.

So this framing around attention is just a piece I wanted to start with. The first aspect of the wandering mind that I'd like to explore—and really the easiest place to explore—is one of the most familiar meditation experiences we have: that of recognizing we've been lost. That moment when, "Oh, I was thinking" or planning or judging. All of those recognitions that Brian pointed to around thinking this morning. Often when we wake up—not always by any means, but often—thinking has been one of the main ways the mind has wandered.

In that moment, we're often oriented towards it in a particular way. We often have a relationship to that moment. Does anybody recognize that sense of exasperation or frustration or disappointment that the mind had wandered?

One alternative way to explore that moment is this: first of all, mindfulness has to return before you can even notice that you've been thinking. So mindfulness returns. And sometimes we can just get curious about that. What is it like for mindfulness to come back? What is that experience when mindfulness returns? It's so common, so familiar, but mostly what happens there is either we're oriented towards the thing we've been aware of—whatever we'd wandered to—or we're judging ourselves. And that judging will block the possibility of being aware of the experience of mindfulness in that moment.

So this being curious about the moment of waking up—it's an amazing moment. It's completely effortless mindfulness. You did not have anything to do with it. It just happened.

As I began exploring that moment and the effortless quality of it, it really began to give me a flavor of what it's like, what it means to be aware in an effortless way. Not trying to hold on to mindfulness. In that moment it's like a free gift of a moment of mindfulness. And if we're curious about that moment, rather than judging ourselves for not having been mindful the moment before—and that moment's already gone anyway—if we're curious about this moment of mindfulness returning and that effortless quality there, what I've seen happening is that getting familiar with this experience of mindfulness returning, it's like it begins to point itself out when it happens. It happens a lot. Way more than you probably think. And we can begin to really appreciate that here on retreat in particular.

As we get familiar with that kind of waking up, that experience of waking up, and as mindfulness returns, there's sometimes a way—not always, but sometimes—that we can see a kind of contrast between this moment when mindfulness is present and a lingering sense or flavor or taste or memory of what it was like a moment before when mindfulness was not there. That contrast between non-mindfulness and

mindfulness begins to highlight for us that experience of the mindfulness returning, that effortless mindfulness returning. You begin to get attuned to it. It's like mindfulness begins to get attuned to itself through this exploration.

As mindfulness gets attuned to itself, or as the mind begins to get more familiar with that quality of the mindfulness returning, the mind recognizes it more often. And you may start to recognize that while you're walking down that hill, largely lost in thought, there are these little bursts, little pop-ins of mindfulness.

But often what happens is when mindfulness pops in, when mindfulness kind of surfaces, it will often connect to some experience through some kind of attention to something. And as it connects to that thing, the habit there is often to start thinking about that thing. We see the worms on the road. We start thinking about the worms. We see other people walking down the hill and we start judging or thinking about what they're doing. So often when that moment of mindfulness returns or begins to come to the surface, it gets pulled back under because we get interested in the thing we have woken up to.

As we can be curious about that moment, it begins to...

It's almost like those little bubble-ups of mindfulness begin to... the mind begins to recognize them sooner as they start to emerge. And so we see more of them. We get more moments of that effortless mindfulness. Free mindfulness. You don't have to work for it. Such a relief.

We usually cultivate mindfulness through something called prompted mindfulness, where when we are mindful, we basically remind ourselves to be mindful. And that's how a lot of our meditation works. We're mindful and we recognize, "Okay, be aware. Connect to this next breath, the in-breath. Can I do it the next breath?" We talked about that kind of "do it again." And again, this light touch—half a breath, this experience, this experience. That's prompting mindfulness because we are mindful and we're reminding ourselves, essentially reminding ourselves to be mindful.

The only way that's going to work is when mindfulness is already present. And so we have to have these spontaneous moments of mindfulness to even get the prompted mindfulness going. The more we can recognize these moments of spontaneous mindfulness, the more we have the opportunity to encourage that cultivation of mindfulness. And it is, at least in my experience, the recognition of that moment of mindfulness returning, the familiarizing with that, is a way of cultivating mindfulness too. Because again, we're getting more sensitive to it, and so we become aware of it more often.

For myself, as I did this exploration of noticing this—at one point on one three-month course at IMS, I kind of just set the intention to see if I could notice that moment of mindfulness returning. And so there was a lot of curiosity about that moment. How early can I see that moment happening? It's not something you can try to do, right? Because you're not in charge at that point. But sometimes we can set an intention and just be curious about it. And that curiosity may really support a reduction of judging mind around the

waking up. It certainly did for me. It really cut through that tendency to think it was a problem that my mind had been wandering. Because every time the mind wandered, it was another opportunity—whenever the mind woke up—to experience that effortless mindfulness and be curious about it, to get to know that difference between being lost and being mindful.

And so in that moment when mindfulness returns, notice that you're aware in a very simple way. This is awareness. And what is obvious in that moment? There is this... the mindfulness is this knowing that we know, and the mindfulness knows something. So what is it that this mindfulness is already aware of as it's returning? Maybe it's the thought. Maybe it's interested in that quality of the brightening of the mind as mindfulness is returning. Maybe it's knowing a fear or a peace or an ease. What is there already in that moment of mindfulness returning? You are already mindful in that moment.

Often in these instructions, in the beginning when we're encouraging stabilizing the mind around the anchor of attention to cultivate some concentration, we often say, "When you notice that you've been thinking, note 'thinking' and then return to the breath." And in my beginning years, I thought that meant basically to come back to mindfulness, come back to directing the attention. And I had completely lost that I was already mindful. When mindfulness returns, we are already aware. What is there already in that moment when we know what's already present, what we're already aware of?

It may be that we are just curious about following the attention at that point, or we may choose to return to an anchor. But at that point we have some... because mindfulness is there and we can draw upon our wisdom, we can make a skillful choice. What's supportive in this moment?

And then we can explore from the other side of the wandering mind: Where does mindfulness get lost? This is sometimes a little more challenging because it's where the mindfulness is slipping out. And sometimes people feel, "Well, it's either here or it's gone, and I can't see it going." But actually we can. We can be curious about that. Sometimes we have to start being curious about that by basically noticing in retrospect when and where we got lost. But getting curious—again, I really want to encourage the sense of curiosity around this exploration.

Not a judgment. The mind is getting lost. And I'm also really wanting to encourage not a sense of doubling down to try to hold the attention to something. Because there's a lot to be learned by seeing, exploring the possibility of mindfulness kind of following where the mind is going as it slips out, as it gets lost. There's a lot that we can learn about that, and about the mind there. We can learn a lot about our minds.

So this exploration of where mindfulness gets lost—what I'm not encouraging here is to try to hold to some object, but rather to be curious. When you recognize certain patterns, when you notice where your mind gets lost, be curious in those times to see what happens there. How does it happen? What is being missed?

As I think I said earlier, when the mind wanders, there's something that the attention has picked up on

that we have not seen. And that's where the mind slips out. Sometimes that thing the attention picks up on that we've not seen is some old habit that's just got so much momentum that that's why the mind wanders. But as the practice deepens, there are a lot of new experiences, subtle experiences, deepenings of the practice where the mind is slipping out partly because mindfulness is beginning to orient towards subtler experience. And we may not be quite able to recognize it.

I'll try to describe some of this, but I'll just go through a few places, a few ways we might lose awareness, simply to encourage some curiosity in these areas.

You might notice after the fact, for instance, that you're losing awareness in particular activities that you do, maybe places that you go. So check it out. Do you tend to lose your awareness when you go to the dining hall? Do you tend to lose your awareness while you're in the meal line and then get it back when you put your plate down on the table? Do you tend to lose mindfulness when you go into your room, close that door—yeah, whew, nobody looking, you don't have to be mindful now? Do you lose mindfulness when you go to the bathroom, or when you do your yogi job, or when you take a walk for exercise as opposed to doing formal practice? What are the activities in which you tend to lose mindfulness?

And you don't have to stop doing those things. I don't want you to stop going to the bathroom. I don't want you to stop going to your room or going to the dining hall. But be curious about what happens there. You go into those rooms—what happens?

It's likely that as you go through the day, you can be curious about this: Where are the holes in mindfulness? Where are the gaps? And then as you notice where the gaps are—if you notice that you tend to lose mindfulness when you go into your room or when you go into the dining hall—you can be curious. As you're approaching your room or approaching the dining hall, again, not doubling down or trying to hold to the mindfulness there, but curious: What happens? Maybe I'll be able to see it this time. Approaching the door, I'm mindful as I open the door. Okay, I'm here, I'm mindful, walking in the door. And then, three minutes later—what happened? I missed something.

And not to beat yourself up about that, not to judge yourself about that. This is normal. This is how we can learn about where our minds get caught. So just the next time you go into your room, be curious what happens.

Often with something like that it's some task. Tasks that we have to do are often places where the mind gets lost. We think of something that we have to do, and mindfulness gets lost. Now it's not necessary for mindfulness to get lost as we think of a task and start to do it. But it's kind of a habitual pattern. And so there's curiosity there, curiosity about that.

We can perhaps begin to learn something about intention here, because at least in my experience, in losing mindfulness in activities or things that I'm doing, it's often some intention to do something that is missed. The intention to look in the mirror when I'm washing my hands—missing that intention. At one

point I was investigating and exploring, and I woke up over and over again staring at myself in the mirror, not seeing how that had happened. And it was simply not seeing the intention to look up.

It wasn't like some deep childhood thing of needing to be seen. It was just an intention, a habit almost, of looking at myself in the mirror. That's all it was. But in that habit there was a loss of mindfulness. So just curiosity about these different activities where you might lose mindfulness.

We might also lose mindfulness in states of mind, in familiar habits or patterns. I'm not going to be able to cover all the different ways I have in my notes here—I can see I'm not going to get through all of the different things I have for where we might lose awareness, so I'll just pick a few of them.

Losing awareness in states of mind. These will tend to be ones that we are habitually hooked to. And so again, we might notice in retrospect, waking up. When we notice the waking up, the moment of waking up, we may notice—as we recognize particular patterns of thinking, for example, planning or judging or remembering—those might point to states of mind that are associated with them. Anxiety or curiosity or fear or something that is happening. So when we wake up into those thoughts, sometimes in the moment of waking up, whatever we wake up into may be a state of mind that we habitually get lost in. And we may begin to recognize this for ourselves. Begin to recognize that we habitually get lost in boredom, or depression, or anger, or confusion. That these are states in which we tend to spiral into the quicksand and lose mindfulness.

And so in the returning, in the mindfulness waking up, the moment when mindfulness returns into something like boredom, something like depression—again, that's a pointing to, that's a moment of mindfulness of something where you habitually aren't mindful.

Another state of mind that we might habitually not be mindful in or get lost in is sleepiness or spaciness. These states that we basically attribute non-mindfulness to. We think perhaps that a spaced out mind is inherently non-mindful, or that a sleepy mind is inherently non-mindful. And that's simply not true. It is a state in which we are habitually not mindful. But it is possible to be mindful of spacing out. And the moment of waking up, the moment when the mind returns—this can become a doorway.

One day I was observing this happen over and over again. I was trying to be mindful of eating and kept noticing the mind spacing out. What I was doing initially was just come back to the eating, just pay attention to that eating, almost trying to double down and force myself to be with the eating because I thought, well, spacing out means not mindful. But at some point it happened enough, and in the moment of waking up there can be a sense of the quality of the mind in that spacing out. I got curious about that and got a little flavor of that mind. A sense of a floating mind. A mind that has stepped back from sense experience. And then at one point, I kind of saw the mind shift into that space, that floating space that was disconnected from sense experience. There wasn't a lot of sense experience, but the mind was completely aware of that state. Mindfulness of spacing out.

In that particular story, there's another kind of interesting learning I had with that experience. As I was exploring the mind losing awareness—noticing it get spaced out and coming back, spacing out, coming back, finally being able to watch it space out—wow, that was cool. Actually, it was really pleasant. It was so restful. The mind was completely relaxed and very mindful. And then the sense impressions came back and the mind was still very relaxed.

It was almost as if—the interpretation I gave to this, I can't really say this interpretation is true, but my sense was—that the mind was tired of having me drag it back to paying attention to the eating. It wanted to rest. And it was going to take its rest whether I let it or not. It took its rest. And after about thirty seconds of just hanging out there in that spacing out, it was like the mind said, "Oh, okay, yeah. Ready to be present again." And then there was the eating and knowing, the seeing and hearing, and it was effortless knowing.

This kind of exploration has been a real doorway for me towards less effortful practice.

Because I'm not trying to hold the mind still, but just being curious: Where does it go? Where does it slip out?

And again, in losing awareness in familiar states of mind—such as boredom or depression—you might begin to recognize that you tend to get lost in those states. Similar to noticing that you get lost in particular places or physical activities, you may recognize at certain points that boredom is here. And you may be able to recognize: "Oh, boredom. Yep, boredom. Mindful of boredom, aware of this, knowing it." The learning of "this is one I tend to get lost in" becomes significant. Something happens in boredom that the mind gets hooked in. So what is that? What happens there?

One exploration, if you start to begin to be present at the beginning of states of mind where you tend to get lost: you wake up into awareness of boredom as it begins to arise and you're knowing it, looking at other experience, and boredom is there. So you're not lost yet. In that early stage of boredom, before you get lost, there's a tool I find useful to help potentially expose some of the undercurrents where we might get caught. And that is to be curious about what kind of beliefs or views are happening. What's being believed right now? Just ask that question, drop that question in.

You don't have to try to figure out the answer. In fact, it's not helpful to try to figure out the answer. It's more just dropping that question in and seeing if it supports or evokes the recognition of some view or idea or opinion.

For myself around depression, for instance, I spent one long stretch of time in Burma looking at a low-grade depression that persisted over several weeks. It came and went, but I just noticed it and began at some point to recognize that the belief was that I thought it was a problem. Such a simple belief. But everything I had been doing—the investigation itself, the way I was paying attention to it—was all in the service of figuring out what was wrong, as opposed to simply: "Oh, this is depression. Not a problem.

What's arising? Oh, it's passing. Okay. Oh, it's arising. It's passing. It's arising. It's passing."

When the mind began to recognize that view—"it's a problem"—the state itself became so fluid. Before I really noticed that I believed it was a problem, it was like that belief locked the depression into place, made it seem much more stable. As soon as I noticed that view, depression came and went and came and went and came and went. It was stunning how fast it happened.

So a way in which we can get hooked and lost in states of mind is because there's some view or belief operating that's not seen. That question can sometimes help us recognize a belief that's operating.

We also can lose awareness as our practice deepens. There are certain times in practice that this is part of what we have to learn to watch and be curious about. Sometimes we might notice that after a period when the mind seemed pretty stable, mindfulness pretty stable and continuous, suddenly it seems like—where did the mindfulness go? We sit down to meditate and the mind wanders. Or sometimes, after a period of stability, it seems like the hindrances just surge in.

One teacher, Michelle McDonald, described this pattern as a kind of practice cycle between purity and purification. Purity being where the mind is at ease, calm, seems like no problem, nothing wrong—just able to be with what's arising. The recognition of the absence of the hindrances, the recognition that reactivity isn't coming up around things we're used to reacting to. That place where the mind seems really stable, at ease and peace, wholesome qualities strengthening—and then suddenly we're flooded with hindrances.

This pattern happens to us over and over again. My understanding of it is that we see through certain kinds of clinging, and as we let go of certain habitual ways we've been reactive, it's like we've got layers and layers and layers of reactivity and clinging. We may let go of an outer layer—those really familiar ways we're reactive and hold on to things, those ways the hindrances come up. That layer may begin to weaken and drop away for stretches of time.

It can feel like we've really entered a new space, a new deepening of our practice. And as the mindfulness keeps going, it hits that next layer where there's yet more, deeper patterns of conditioning that can be revealed and seen. And so we cycle—purity, purification, purity, purification. This is not an uncommon thing to happen.

If you notice that after a period of a few days of real ease and peace, the mind has suddenly gotten very reactive, what I've seen in my own practice is instructive. In the early years of my practice, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what I'd done wrong, beating myself up about the fact that I was now reactive again. I must have done something wrong to have lost that.

But what we can instead do, perhaps knowing this cycle—as I began to understand this cycle, that reactivity to the shift from purity to purification began to get much less. It's just like, "Oh, it's a new level of clinging here. Okay, curiosity about that." It's not easy to let go of that peace. But this is what's arising

now, and it's not a mistake.

Another thing that can happen as the practice deepens is that the mindfulness is noticing experience—it's noticing the breath, for example—and it gets really familiar with particular qualities and sensations of the breath. It's like the object and the mindfulness are right in sync. Every breath, all of those sensations are right there, and you can just hang with that breath.

And then, because the mindfulness is strengthening and getting more continuous, my sense actually is that as the mindfulness gets more continuous, there's something—it's like it gets interested or drawn down to a subtler level of experience. There's some kind of orientation of the attention to subtler experience as the mindfulness gets more continuous. Only our agenda is to pay attention to this, because this is what we're familiar with—to pay attention to that familiar experience. And when there's a mismatch between what we think we should pay attention to and what the attention is naturally drawn to, the mind can get lost.

For myself in one sitting at IMS, there were a couple of days where the mindfulness just got right into the breath. I could sit down and the mind was with the breath for the whole sitting. It was effortless, it was easy. And then the next day—three days into this—next day I sit down, first sitting of the day, one breath and the mind's wandering. Another breath, the mind's wandering. It was like I had no control, no capacity to stay with the breath.

I had enough experience there not to beat myself up, but to begin to recognize—again, if you notice the mind starts to wander a lot after a period where there's been stability of mindfulness, it usually means there's a shift in the practice. Something new is being revealed. Something new is happening. And so I got curious: what's happening here? What new is happening?

What I began to recognize is that as I watched the breath, what I was familiar with—it was like as soon as I touched the breath, all the sensations disappeared. They were just vanishing, those sensations, and I didn't quite know how to meet that. At one point with one of my Burmese teachers, I described this and he said, "You just have to recognize there's no sensation." I was trying to find the sensations. He says, "Just know they're not there." Okay, I can do that.

Again, I was looking for something that I was familiar with to pay attention to, and he pointed me to the reduction of sensation, the disappearance of sensation.

Another experience that can happen as the practice deepens, that's useful to explore, is noticing when the mindfulness lets go of some experience. Maybe you're paying attention to hearing or there's something that the attention is connected with. This is noticing that the attention shifts to something else—really picking up on that shift of mindfulness moving to some other experience. Only this is not seeing that it's landing on something else. This is seeing the release from something that we're familiar with.

As an example, at one point, again doing breath meditation, I was paying attention to the breath and I

began noticing that I could see the mindfulness weakening around the breath. It was like I could feel the mindfulness let go of the breath. At first, what I did with that was, "Oh, mindfulness is letting go. Just connect with the breath again." And then it would let go. It would just feel like this

Kind of a releasing feeling, a release. The mindfulness would let go, and I'd come back to the breath. It would let go, I'd come back to the breath. Let go, come back to the breath.

And at some point, there was this wisdom that arose: "Well, it let go. I'm aware that it let go. Let's see where it's going."

That was an opening into a new kind of state I'd never consciously experienced before—a vast kind of space I had no name for. It felt like a new landscape.

Again, there's that kind of respect, especially as the practice deepens, for being with what the mind is doing. In this case, I had the agenda to hold attention to the breath. But there was something deeper acting, some deeper wisdom that was releasing from the breath and moving in the direction of that spacious, open awareness.

It takes trust to let go and not know where the attention will go. It almost feels like stepping off a cliff, to not know. There's a place for that trust at times. And we ultimately do have to trust that, because we don't know what freedom looks like. We have to allow freedom to be revealed—stepping into that unknown.

This exploration around the edges of the wandering mind, especially as the practice deepens and starts to shift into unfamiliar terrain—I look at that as practice for opening to freedom.

Let's sit for a minute.

One of the things about this kind of practice of watching where the attention goes: sometimes we can't quite do it. We can maybe set the intention for it, but the activity of trying to do it will get in the way. So just as you sit here, open to the possibility that you might notice these shifts of attention. But let go of any doing around it.

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