Recognizing Awareness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 56:45

Tonight I'd like to explore the topic of mindfulness itself—becoming familiar with the experience of mindfulness, the experience of awareness.

One way I've found interesting to explore this quality of mindfulness in my own practice is through seeing or noticing how mindfulness comes and goes. We often talk about this from the other side: we talk about the wandering mind, about mindfulness getting lost. But I like to explore the edges of that phenomenon. What does it mean to be curious about mindfulness itself through looking at the edges of this familiar, really familiar process of mindfulness getting lost? Noticing when it comes back, and also beginning to see something about how it gets lost.

So really we're investigating mindfulness itself, noticing it as a quality itself—not so interested in what mindfulness takes in, what mindfulness is aware of, although that matters too. In this talk, I'd like to emphasize the awareness side itself so that we can begin to get familiar with this experience of mindfulness. There's a lot we can learn looking at how mindfulness comes and goes.

We can see how our minds get caught. We can recognize the uncontrollability of the mind. When we sit down to practice, intending to be present, intending to be mindful, what happens? Mindfulness goes away. Not because we decided to have it go away, but because of conditions. We didn't choose to have that happen; it happened because of conditions.

And likewise—sometimes even more amazing, really, reflecting about it—mindfulness comes back. And who did that? We were off wandering around, thinking about something or other, and suddenly we become aware again. We didn't choose to do that either. This seeing of this simple phenomenon that we're so familiar with is a pointer to the teaching of not-self.

I've also found this kind of exploration around the edges of mindfulness getting lost helps to bring curiosity rather than judgment around the getting lost itself. When I turned the mind towards this curiosity of noticing the return of mindfulness, rather than emphasizing the fact that mindfulness had been lost—"Oh, mindfulness is back!"—no matter how many times the mind wandered in a sitting, it gave me an opportunity to notice that moment of mindfulness returning, to see the effortless quality of that mindfulness returning.

That is a great moment. We didn't have to do a thing to have that mindfulness return. It happened. We can begin to connect with that curiosity about mindfulness itself and the effortless quality of that mindfulness returning. It's a pointer to how effortless mindfulness can be, because we didn't have to do that moment of

mindfulness.

We think we know what mindfulness is, perhaps. We have some words for it: being with experience, being present, being aware, knowing what's happening while it's happening. And yet in some ways it is a mysterious thing. Some of the things we think about what mindfulness is—like what I pointed to the other day, that I thought if I wasn't deciding what to be mindful of, it meant I wasn't mindful. This recognition that attention and mindfulness are separate things, that we don't have to consciously choose. There's just this knowing, this awareness of what's happening in the present moment while it's happening.

I think of mindfulness as related to this very simple, ordinary capacity of our human minds to know what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. And yet the mindfulness that the Buddha pointed us to was not just that simple knowing. He pointed us to right mindfulness, sammā sati. A simple way to understand it is that we know experience happening in the present moment and are interested in it as experience happening in the present moment.

Maybe that just sounds like repeating myself, but it's different than what our minds typically do. Typically, in becoming aware of something, in being present—especially before we've met the practice of mindfulness—when we become aware of what's happening in the present moment, we engage with our agendas around it. We engage with our thoughts about how it can be useful for me to do this or not do this, to get this thing or not get this thing, to act, to engage.

The mindfulness that is onward leading, right mindfulness, is a very simple kind of awareness that is curious about what's happening as a human experience. Frustration is arising in the present moment—what is the experience of a human being feeling frustration in the present moment? What is that like? That's very different than frustration arising in the present moment and trying to figure out what to do about that frustration.

The texts actually speak about wrong mindfulness as opposed to right mindfulness. Wrong mindfulness is defined as being part of the wrong eightfold path. Wrong mindfulness comes out of wrong view, wrong intention. When there's wrong view and wrong intention, the kind of mindfulness that would arise would not be the kind of mindfulness that is onward leading.

A classic example of wrong mindfulness is the possible mindfulness of a thief moving through a house to steal something. The thief might be very present, very aware of every step, every movement—particularly if someone is in the house while they're stealing. They're acutely aware, making themselves very quiet while moving through the house. And yet the motivation for that mindfulness is greed. It's not the curiosity of "What is it like to take a step? What is it like to touch? What is it like to be here in this moment?" There's an agenda behind it with a quality of unwholesome motivation.

This framing of wise mindfulness or right mindfulness—being curious about what this present moment experience is, being curious about what is leading to suffering and what is leading away from

suffering—that points us in the direction of right mindfulness.

In terms of getting familiar with mindfulness itself, getting familiar with this experience of mindfulness (and in this talk I'll use the terms mindfulness and awareness synonymously), one of the places where it can begin to be clear what the experience of mindfulness actually is, is in the moment when mindfulness returns after it has been lost. After the mind has been off thinking about something, not mindful, and mindfulness returns—that moment. That moment of mindfulness returning.

This is sometimes called in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, "unprompted mindfulness." It is a mindfulness that is not arising based on our own intention. It is simply arising based on conditions—some of those conditions being the cultivation of mindfulness in the past. It is not our conscious doing. This is my understanding of unprompted mindfulness.

That moment of mindfulness returning—if we can be curious about it, as I said this morning, "aware again, aware again," and be really interested in that experience, the awareness side of that experience. In the moment when mindfulness returns, it's like the moment before. Sometimes there's a little lag in actually noticing that mindfulness has returned. But we can be curious about this moment, interested in seeing it. And yet it's not something we can decide to do. By its very nature, we cannot say, "I'm going to know when mindfulness returns." It's more of an intention, a setting of curiosity. This is something I'm curious about.

So this curiosity about that moment may allow us to begin to see it more clearly, to begin to understand it as, "Oh, mindfulness is back. Aware again." And in that moment, as we see mindfulness returning, there is a little bit of difference. There's a quality in that moment as mindfulness comes back—a difference between what it feels like now that the mind is aware and what the experience was a moment before, when the mind was caught in something and mindfulness wasn't so available.

So there's a moment in that arising of mindfulness where we can see the difference between what it means for mindfulness to be here and for mindfulness not to be here. We can begin to notice that difference between being mindful and not being mindful in that moment as mindfulness returns. It's not exactly that we know what it's like in the moment to not be mindful, but there's a lingering flavor, a lingering understanding as mindfulness returns of what that moment before was like. Its flavor lingers a little bit, and we can have a sense of, "Oh, this is what it's like to be mindful. This is the experience of mindfulness. This is awareness. Awareness is here."

As we begin to be curious about that experience of the moment of mindfulness returning—a great moment because it's not something we have to do, it's completely effortless—and as we get familiar with it, the very familiarity with that experience creates the conditions for us to become more attuned to it. It creates the conditions for us to see that moment of mindfulness returning more easily. And it happens a lot, way more than you think.

This moment of mindfulness, this awareness of what's happening in the present moment—it happens. And often, very quickly, as mindfulness arises in our daily activities, when we're lost in something not particularly mindful and suddenly become aware of something, it may be that we've become aware and then immediately think, "What do I have to do to take care of that thing? What do I need to do about that?" Sometimes those moments of mindfulness arise, and if we're not attuned to recognizing them, they get submerged again really quickly. Yet as we get interested in that moment, as we explore curiosity about recognizing it, we become attuned to that experience and see it more and more.

This simple practice of attuning to that moment has the benefit of creating more moments—or rather, having us recognize more of those moments—which in turn creates the conditions for more of those moments to be noticed. So it's not the arising of it that requires effort; the arising is effortless. There's a subtle sense of recognizing, of landing with it, that requires perhaps a little bit of personal effort. Noticing it has arisen: "Oh yes, aware again."

That's the effort, that's the recognition. Aware again, awareness is back. What's that? What's that experience? And in that moment, we notice that experience of awareness, notice the awareness itself, and then our practice becomes: What's obvious? What's obvious in that moment?

And potentially, as I was speaking about this morning, if the mind has been caught in something—whether caught in thought or caught in an emotion or a mood or a mind state—when the mindfulness returns, it's likely that there will be some experience in the present moment. That's the landscape of experience we're waking up into, and it has been conditioned by the previous moments of thinking or being pulled into a particular mind state.

So when mindfulness returns, there's going to be some flavor connected to what had been happening. I often speak about it as waking up in—what is the landscape now, now that mindfulness has returned? What is the landscape you're waking up into? Depending on how long the mindfulness was lost, the landscape may be very different than it was before the mindfulness got lost. And so there's a curiosity about that: What's here now? What's obvious? What is here now?

Sometimes checking the attitude can also be useful, because an attitude can sometimes be constructed while mindfulness is lost. For instance, if mindfulness was lost and we were thinking about something that frustrated us, if we come back and notice, "Well, I'm aware," but we don't really take in that there had been this ripple of frustration informing the mind in the previous moments—if we don't notice that, then in just turning to what's here right now, we might observe, "Okay, there's body sensation, there's this, there's that," without really noticing that an attitude may have been created, an attitude of frustration. That attitude doesn't necessarily have anything to do with body sensation or what's happening in our current experience. It was constructed based on thinking about perhaps a memory. But if we don't notice in that moment when mindfulness returns that this flavor is there, it may become the attitude, and we may have frustration about whatever's happening because it wasn't clearly seen.

And so that moment—noticing, aware again—and what's the landscape you're waking up into? As I also mentioned this morning, the landscape might well be far more than I could have possibly thought it would be. It might be more calm or more ease than there was before mindfulness got lost. Sometimes the mind kind of finds its way in the getting lost. Sometimes it finds its way to a letting go. And so when mindfulness returns, what is the landscape? Not particularly looking for hindrances or greed, aversion, delusion there, but just what's there—because sometimes it can be beautiful qualities of mind that are present when mindfulness returns.

And so in that moment, the recognizing—aware again—and beginning to get a little bit familiar with the difference between the awareness and the not being aware in the moments before. Just getting familiar with that.

We can also begin to be curious. One thing I'll say as an overarching theme for this talk and many of the talks that at least I will give: it may sound at times like this is a suggestion of something to do, but as Sayadaw often mentions—and many times I've gone off trying to do something he's talked about and come back and reported something, and he said, "Well, were you trying to do that?" And I said, "Yes. Didn't you tell me to do that?" He said, "Nothing I say is anything for you to do. It's just information that may help orient the mind in a particular way while you're just noticing your experience."

And so sometimes we can think of these Dharma talks almost as Dharma rain—just gently falling information that can land on the earth and seep into the ground, and maybe the plants will grow based on that water, but not so much something to pick up as an activity. Sometimes it's hard not to speak that way. I try, and I almost always get caught in the language of, "Oh, you can pay attention to..." So what I'm talking about is things that can be noticed. These are more descriptions of things that might be able to be noticed than instructions about something to do.

Along these lines, something we can notice—or there can be a curiosity about—is what it feels like when mindfulness is already present. So that experience of the continuity of mindfulness: we can begin to get a flavor of that momentum of mindfulness also as the experience of mindfulness. And that is a place where we can prompt the mindfulness a little bit. I talked about unprompted and prompted mindfulness before. We can prompt the mindfulness a little bit, just reminding ourselves gently. When we are aware, we can remind ourselves to be aware. And yet I've already heard in some of the group meetings that sometimes there's a little bit—it sounds like a little bit of overdoing of that prompting.

Some of you have been describing the mind getting tired with this aspect of the practice. So this is a place where getting familiar with that prompting experience of mindfulness as it becomes more continuous becomes important—the feeling of just being present. That's a way to frame it potentially: it's simply the experience of being present.

As we get a flavor of that experience, we may start to recognize where the mindfulness gets a little bit loose. We may notice it becoming less stable. And that would be when to bring the reminders back in. The

reminders are very simple. It might be as simple as "aware." Or maybe it's just recognizing "already aware"—noticing that, oh yes, already aware.

So there's the other side of this exploration of the comings and goings of mindfulness. We've talked about mindfulness returning. We can also get curious about that place where mindfulness begins to weaken, where it begins to get lost. Where does mindfulness get lost? Where does awareness get lost?

Initially this exploration happens in retrospect—when mindfulness returns, we notice that it has been lost, and we may know something about the conditions around which it got lost. Not that we have to do a lot there, but again, it's very simple: when we wake up, we may recognize that mindfulness got lost because we went into our room. We closed the door, and it's like, "Oh, don't have to be mindful, nobody's looking." So being curious about this—where does mindfulness get lost?

This begins to support continuity as we recognize what conditions mindfulness gets lost with. It's not about judging ourselves. And it's also not about doubling down when we notice certain areas or mind states in which we tend to lose mindfulness. Instead, being curious: when that happens, we've noticed a pattern. And the noticing of the pattern seems to happen naturally. Our minds are natural pattern recognizers. So if we're curious about what patterns surround the loss of mindfulness, we'll begin to notice them. It doesn't have to be a big project.

When we begin to notice that mindfulness gets lost in certain experiences or activities, rather than having the idea of something like, "Okay, I know that when I go into my room mindfulness gets lost, so I'm going to force myself to stay mindful—I'm going to know every single moment when I walk in that door and really make myself be mindful"—that's not what I'd like to propose here. Instead, I'd rather that you be curious about what happens when you go in your room. Get curious about what catches the mind. What does the mind get hooked to? What does it do?

There are many different places and areas we can explore like this. We can be curious in a broad sense about various times of day, various activities, where we recognize: "Yeah, not very mindful while I'm doing my dishes, while I'm doing my yogi job, while I'm walking around the loop, while I'm in the bathroom." We may notice these areas, these places where mindfulness kind of... it's like these little sinkholes of mindfulness.

As you notice a pattern like that—"Oh yeah, I tend to lose my mindfulness in my yogi job"—then when you're headed to your yogi job, you might be mindful. And again, not to say "I'm going to force myself to be mindful with all of that chopping," but just be curious what happens. It's an interesting thing. Carol talked the other day about letting the mindfulness just come along for the ride with what's happening. That's what I'm proposing here. Come along for the ride where you know mindfulness tends to get lost, and be curious about where it slips. What happens there?

We can begin to see that not by trying to see it, not by trying to force ourselves to stay present. If we're

trying to force ourselves to stay present through the whole thing, we won't see where the mind gets caught, because we'll be preempting it by forcing mindfulness to stay. So it's really this almost willingness to let mindfulness slip in order to see what happens in that moment. When you notice areas like that, just see if you can bring some curiosity to it.

What goes on there? What goes on?

So we might lose awareness in specific activities. I talked the other day of another way that we can lose awareness—or may tend to lose awareness—when attention shifts and we don't notice that attention has shifted. That's another common way for mindfulness to get lost.

I mentioned the seeing, looking, hearing, listening—the attention shifts to something else. Again, if there's curiosity about that shift of attention... and I'm not saying you shouldn't let the attention shift, but just what is it that draws the attention? And knowing that, knowing that shift of attention, developing familiarity with that shift—again, not as something to do, not as a project. I'm just mentioning this as something that can be seen, which may help you be curious about it, and may help there to be some seeing of it.

The seeing, looking, hearing, listening is an easy place to begin that exploration. But it happens everywhere. Our attention is very frequently shifting from experience to experience, particularly in this receptive kind of practice. We're receiving what is happening, and the attention is picking up on new experience moment after moment.

At one point I described this experience of the attention picking up on all these different experiences, the shifting of attention, the feeling of the shift—but it's really just the arising of a new experience. And I mentioned that to Sayadaw, and he kind of got into that. He said, "Yeah, it's kind of like you're taking a dog for a walk. And that dog is into everything. It's sniffing this and looking at that and barking at that—it's all over the place. But our job is just to hold on to the leash. We just stay connected." And then wherever the attention goes, we can know that.

But very frequently when the attention shifts to something, if we're not aware that it has shifted, we'll start thinking about it. And then mindfulness will get lost.

We also tend to lose awareness in habitual states of mind, ones that we tend to be identified with—our kind of favorite flavors. You've all practiced so much; you probably know your favorite flavors of identification, the things that our mind tends to get stuck to and caught by. And those tend to be things that mindfulness gets lost with.

Often we tend to notice in retrospect that we have been caught by something—a mind state, a depression or frustration or anger, an aversion, a desire, a fear, a doubt, a confusion. We may not see the getting lost in it initially. And yet, with these very habitual states of mind, we probably will wake up into them. So when mindfulness returns, we will notice that the mind has returned.

At some points—not always, of course, as I mentioned earlier—sometimes when mindfulness returns it actually is more settled. But some chunk of the time when mindfulness returns, it will return and what will be happening is one of those habitual mind states. And so in that moment of mindfulness returning in that habitual mind state, really—oh, this is what's happening. Oh, here's that familiar mind state. Okay, what's this like?

Again, what's this landscape of this familiar habitual state of mind? And check the attitude. Can it be okay that this is happening? This is just an opportunity to learn about this habitual mind state. It's something that has probably been practiced for years. And here it is—an opportunity, while you're mindful, to get to know it, to get familiar with it, to learn something about it.

And so in that moment, as we really begin to get familiar with the quality of that state, what I've seen in my own practice is that as I've gotten curious about these habitual states—similar to what I described about the seeing of mindfulness returning, how as we get familiar with that it begins to kind of point itself out to us and we notice it more—as we get more attuned to the qualities of those habitual mind states, what it's like in the body, what the mind is like, the felt sense of that state, it begins to attune us to that state.

In my experience, as I've gotten curious about just waking up with some of these habitual states, noticing them, being curious, being present for them, what has happened is that over time the mindfulness seems to have gotten attuned to that state. It's almost like the state itself becomes a mindfulness bell. It begins to wake us up when it happens.

In my experience, that habitual pattern—in my case the first one I really explored was anger—began to point itself out. I noticed that I was waking up into anger, but it was not as deeply wound as it had been early on. So the practice of noticing it helped the mind to recognize it and wake up into it earlier. This created the conditions for seeing it before it got quite so sticky.

And then also, to my amazement, it began to create the conditions so that I could almost see it coming before it came. The mind began to get so familiar with that pattern that it began to recognize the scent of it approaching. And at that point, the mind could really be present with the arising of that habitual state and learn something very deep about it—and also potentially see the pull into wanting to go into it.

That was shocking to me, actually, when I saw this, especially around anger.

I saw this kind of inclining towards anger. Not angry in the moment, but just seeing the thought—it's like a freight train of "yeah, I really want to get angry here." Just feeling that movement towards it. It was remarkable: this is the momentum of that pattern. If I hadn't been mindful for that, the mindfulness would have gotten lost. But being present for it had a power to help me stay present in that moment and not get pulled into the pattern of the anger.

So again, we can be curious about what are the states of mind in which mindfulness gets lost, where

mindfulness tends to not be available. And then aside from our kind of identified states, there are some familiar habits or familiar states of mind that many of us tend to almost equate with non-mindfulness: sleepiness, spaciness, zoning out, low energy.

At one point I had a long stretch, a couple of years, where the energy was so low. I had many, many moments where what the mind was saying and believing was, "I don't have enough energy to be mindful." I remember so clearly—I was actually doing walking meditation on the driveway in front of IMS—and I had that thought: "I'm just too low energy, I'm too exhausted to be mindful." And I noticed that thought, was aware of that thought. And then I noticed: but seeing is happening, I'm aware of seeing. Hearing is happening, aware of hearing. So there's mindfulness already happening.

In retrospect, what in that particular state of low energy I didn't have the capacity to do was to choose what to be mindful of. I couldn't direct the attention. The mind was pretty exhausted. But there was already mindfulness happening.

This can point us to the recognition that some of these states that we think are inherently non-mindful—maybe, just maybe, you can be mindful of the state itself. Dull mind. Sleepy mind. Maybe we can't be mindful in the way that we'd like to be mindful. We can't be mindful while potentially choosing what we'd like to be attending to. Not that we're trying to do that here anyway, but still there's the habit of believing "too sleepy to be mindful." If you have that thought—"I'm too sleepy to be mindful"—and you notice or can be aware of that thought, I'd like to propose that you have enough awareness to be mindful of the sleepiness.

We sometimes have the belief that mindfulness feels a certain way. And that's where this comes from, I think—that low energy, "there's not enough energy to be mindful"—it comes from a belief that when I'm mindful, it feels like there's energy. It feels like there's clarity in the mind.

We may have a kind of a sense, when we're noticing what it's like when we're mindful—and often when we first notice that, when we first really get a sense of familiarity with what it's like to be mindful—there's a particular quality of mindfulness that's happening in that moment. Often it has to do with clarity. We know that there's a lot of clarity of contact. We know exactly what the objects are. There's a brightness in the mind that often feels pleasant. And so we have this experience and we're interested in what it's like to be mindful. It's like, "Oh, this is mindfulness." And yes, there is the continuity of mindfulness there. That is the experience of mindfulness. But there's a lot of extra things there that we're also attributing to mindfulness—like that particular kind of clarity, like the pleasantness. The mindfulness is simply the being aware.

At one point I was practicing at Shwe Oo Min monastery with Sayadaw, and as I was shifting from walking meditation to sitting meditation, I noticed the mind trying to shift its state in order to put itself into a more "meditative" state. And noticing that, there was a kind of wisdom question: "Well, what's wrong with this state? Why does the mind think it has to change the state in order to meditate?"

If I ever notice at this point that I'm trying to change the state of my mind or think I can't be mindful while something is happening—that's just a thought. It's just a belief. It's just the mind believing something, believing that it can't be mindful. If it has enough energy or enough recognition that it's noticing the thing it thinks it can't be mindful of, it can be mindful of it.

So if you're seeing that, if you're seeing the mind trying to change the state because of some belief or view that it can't be mindful, try the mindfulness first, before doing something. Now, it may well be—and some of you have described in our meetings—that sometimes there's something strong that happens and there's a kind of feeling of being pulled into the sinkhole or the rabbit hole of a particular mind state.

There are times when a mind state is stronger than our capacity to be mindful of it. We need to be honest with ourselves about that and honor that the mindfulness isn't quite strong enough to meet some of those powerful states. And yet, give yourself the chance to see if there is mindfulness that can meet it. So often we have the belief that we can't be mindful of something because in the past it was hard to be mindful of it. Give yourself the opportunity to check: Can I be mindful of this? What's the attitude?

In the noticing of mindfulness itself—that sense of being present, that familiar quality we often go for of clarity, of knowing every single experience—there are different ways that mindfulness can feel. So trusting, or being curious about: Am I aware? That question—am I aware?—we may not know what we're aware of. There may not be any clarity around contact at all. You may have no clue what the object is, but we may know that we're aware. Trust that you know that you're aware.

Explore the discomfort. Usually that can come with some discomfort—often it can come with some discomfort when we're not clear about the object. So notice that. Discomfort's happening. Don't know the object, and discomfort's happening. Okay, that's what's going on.

There are different ways I've noticed the experience feeling. Sometimes the attention is very focused and the mindfulness can be very present and clear. Sometimes there can be a very broad experience of awareness, knowing many different experiences. Sometimes it feels like one experience is known after another and there's a lot of clarity—this thing, and then this thing, and then this thing. Other times it feels more vague, like a shifting landscape, without real clarity about where the attention is at any given moment.

Sometimes it feels like the mind knows many things all at once. Sometimes it feels more like popcorn—individual things being known, popping in and out of existence. Sometimes it can feel like there's a separation between the knowing and the known. It feels like there's a distance, or it's clearly apparent that there's a difference between what is known and the knowing. Sometimes it feels like there's an actual separation.

It can feel like there's a lot of space around the object. Often there's that quality of feeling like there's space around the experience. Sometimes people point to that kind of feeling of having space around the

experience as being what it's like to be mindful—that's what I'm going for, that's the experience I'm looking for, that spacious feeling around what's happening. But sometimes it doesn't have that feeling of spaciousness or separation. It feels like the mindfulness is right in the middle of what's happening.

And so again, being curious: Is there awareness? That question, that simple question—aware—seems almost like a throwaway question. Because if we can ask the question, almost by definition... I have known people to just kind of repeat "aware, aware, aware, aware," not aware, having it become almost like a mantra they've gotten lost in. But if there's any recognition of that "aware," there is awareness.

And yet it seems like it might be just a throwaway question—if I can ask the question, why bother? If I think of even asking the question, why bother? But what it begins to do is point the mind to be curious about the awareness itself. Aware? And using that question when there's any sense of uncertainty—am I aware? Am I aware?—often that doubt is about a different experience of awareness that we're not familiar with. So trusting that: okay, aware, yeah, no idea what I'm aware of, but knowing that I'm aware.

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