Exploring the Edges of the Wandering Mind

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As we observe our minds, we start to see patterns, habits of mind that are familiar. We all have different habits of mind. Some of us may have more aversive habits. Some of us may have more wanting habits. But there's one habit of mind that we all share, and that is the habit of the mind wandering. I'd like to talk about getting curious about this habit of mind.

It's useful to get curious about any of our habits of mind and begin to investigate them, explore what's happening around them. What are the conditions that lead to their happening? What are the conditions that lead to their ending? The same is true around the wandering mind.

The wandering mind happens in different ways. What I mean by wandering mind is basically a state of low mindfulness or no mindfulness—mindfulness has disappeared. This experience while it's wandering can be very different, and when we come back there can be very different experiences given what has been happening in the wandering.

Sometimes the mind loses touch with experience and it might just be with a kind of drifting, almost a daydreamy quality. There's been a lot of this; I've heard many of you describing this in your meetings with us. As the mind settles and gets a little more concentrated, this happens. It's not like the mind is charging out and thinking about something we know about. Sometimes it's even images or thoughts about people we don't know, topics we don't care about. It's just drifting. That's one way this wandering mind happens.

Then there are the more active ways, where the mind charges out to take up the mantle of something that happened in our past or our future—strong thoughts of past or future. Then there are mind storms, where it just feels like you're swamped.

A lot of what I've described involves some form of thought. Often the wandering mind involves some form of thought, but not always, because sometimes the mind can drift into states where there's not much thought, but there's also not much mindfulness. Spacing out has this kind of quality. Sometimes the mind can get lost in pleasant states, like calm. We get really, really calm and tranquil and then the mindfulness just... there we are, somewhere in the universe.

We can't make ourselves come out of the wandering. We can't make the mindfulness come back. But it will come back at some point. This is one of the great things about mindfulness—it's a natural quality of mind, an ordinary quality of mind that happens in our lives. It functions to help us live, and so sometimes it gets lost, and then there are conditions that help it come back.

Now, this is distinguishing mindfulness from right mindfulness. Just being aware in the present moment

doesn't necessarily mean that we are oriented with the perspective of wisdom, with the perspective of right view. But it's a simple perspective, and mostly when we use the word mindfulness, we mean right mindfulness. The simple perspective of mindfulness is: What is this? What is this human experience?

The quality of mindfulness being ordinary means it's a quality that naturally comes and goes. We don't have to be taught about it in order for mindfulness to arise, but we do need to be taught to use that mindfulness in a skillful way. This is what the Buddha taught us—this curiosity about what is this present moment experience as a human experience, and to also be curious about what is leading to struggle and suffering and what leads away from struggle and suffering. These are the aspects of right effort leading to right mindfulness.

We can't make mindfulness re-arise, any kind of mindfulness, but when mindfulness does re-arise, we have the opportunity to bring this perspective back—the perspective of curiosity, of kindness, of allowing, of that receptive interest in what's happening. And when we notice that the mind is waking up, we can get curious about that.

And this is one of the pieces that I really want to explore around the wandering mind.

Sally talked about working with thoughts the other day, and I don't want to go into that aspect so much. What I do want to do is really talk about exploring what I'll call the edges of the wandering mind—what happens in the mind when mindfulness returns, that edge of the wandering mind, and what happens as the mind is kind of letting go of paying attention and slipping out.

We can be curious about both sides, and there is a lot to learn about our minds by looking at this, by being curious about this part of our experience.

We often have a relationship with the wandering mind as being something of a problem. It's something we want to not do. And so we have a relationship with the fact that the mind has wandered, and that's often a judging relationship. That relationship—having a judging attitude when the mind is returning from being lost—we miss the opportunity to catch that edge, to catch that edge of mindfulness returning.

And likewise on the other edge, where mindfulness is kind of slipping out. Often we have this relationship of not wanting the mind to wander, so we might double down on trying to keep the mind here. And we might miss the opportunity to see something new as the mind lets go of what it's paying attention to and begins to orient to something else.

So I'll talk about both of these sides and what we can learn, how we might be curious about this. I've learned so much through this exploration, and I really just hope to convey some of my own delight and joy in watching this process going on in the mind—not trying to stop it necessarily, but being curious about it.

There's a lot we can learn. I want to start by giving an overview of some of the things we can discover by noticing these edges of the wandering mind.

Given that the wandering mind is often connected to the mind getting caught by something, there's much we can learn about that. When we return, we can learn something about the ways we get caught. Do we tend to get caught in planning or judging or fantasizing? We can begin to learn what makes us lose balance of mind, where we tend to get caught. We get familiar with our top patterns of mind, essentially, by noticing where we are when mindfulness returns.

Another important learning that's kind of staring us in the face—but we don't really take in often—is that the wandering mind is actually a pointer, a piece of evidence, for this truth of not-self.

We sit down to meditate. We think, "I'm sitting down to meditate." We pay attention to what's happening in the present moment; we connect with our breath, with sound, our body, a broader sense of experience. And how long does that last? The mind wanders. Who made the mind wander? We didn't do that. Some conditions came into play that made mindfulness disappear.

So we think we sit down to meditate, and then the mind gets lost. Why does that happen? Essentially, it's habits. It's conditions. It's habits of mind. We have very little control over the fact that the mind wanders out of the present moment. We have no control over how long it wanders and when we wake up.

And that's another amazing thing. We're lost in something or other—some memory or plan—and suddenly mindfulness returns. Who did that? Again, conditions. Conditions arose that allowed mindfulness to return in that moment.

And so this wandering mind, the fact of this wandering mind which we see hundreds if not thousands of times a day, is a pointer to a very deep truth: we don't have control over our minds.

The Buddha pointed to this in one of the discourses he gave about the five aggregates, or five aspects of our experience that make up the various functions of our minds and bodies. He said of all of these—and I'm not going to go into them in detail; we'll probably give a talk on the aggregates at some point—these five are form or body, feeling, perception, mental formations (which includes thoughts, emotions, and states of mind like mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom), and consciousness.

Of those five—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—mental formations contains a lot. It contains thoughts, mindfulness, and much more. And in one sutta, the Buddha took each of these five and gave a little discourse around its uncontrollability. He said, "Mental formations are not self."

Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were the self, it would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to mindfulness, "Let my mindfulness be thus. Let my mindfulness not be thus." But precisely because mindfulness is not self, it lends itself to dis-ease. It is not possible to say, "Let my mindfulness be thus."

We can cultivate conditions that support mindfulness, but we don't have absolute control. Just as this

example of the mind wandering shows us—mindfulness gets lost. Habits take the mindfulness away. It's not self that it does that.

And so, if we can let it in, the fact of the wandering mind can be, instead of some kind of affront to our practice, a reminder. Mental formations are not self. It's evidence for this process nature of our minds. And so that's another piece that we can learn about. To me it's almost more of an attitude associated with the wandering mind—that we're more curious about it instead of having a combative relationship with it. Just that curiosity: when is mindfulness? Wow, here it is again. Here it is, right there. Or feeling it kind of slipping out. What's happening? What conditions are arising that it's feeling like it's getting smothered? What's going on?

So that's a significant thing that we can explore—having a different relationship with the wandering mind that helps us to take in that truth, the uncontrollability of the mind.

Another piece that we can start to really see, learn about, and explore is this: the wandering mind is a really good place to get familiar with and get a taste of what the experience of awareness itself is like. Here in this talk I'm going to be using the words awareness and mindfulness synonymously. I actually prefer awareness to mindfulness. Mindfulness to me has a kind of mental quality, whereas awareness feels more diffuse, more pervading—rather than being located in the mind. For me it's more resonant, more evocative of the quality that I think we mean when we say mindfulness, or when we use the word *sa ti*, the Pali word that's usually translated as mindfulness.

So we can begin to learn something about mindfulness itself, about awareness itself, through seeing the wandering mind. Essentially, what we are exploring in this case is the coming and going of mindfulness. That's all the wandering mind is—the coming and going of mindfulness. And we can explore it from that perspective.

One of the easiest places to start this exploration around the edges of the wandering mind is when mindfulness returns. We've been lost, we're not present, and mindfulness comes back. What we usually do in that moment—or many of us have had at least a habit of—is maybe judging ourselves about that. Our mind has been wandering. As soon as mindfulness returns, there can be almost a feeling of yanking ourselves back to the breath, or pulling ourselves—it's like mindfulness has returned and we think, "Oh, I need to be back somewhere."

But in that moment when mindfulness has returned, we're already back. There's nowhere to come back to. Mindfulness has arisen.

And one of the great things to check into there is: what is the experience of becoming mindful again? It's a very distinct experience in the moment after we've been lost and mindfulness returns. It can be a very distinct experience as we catch it, as we get curious about this moment and catching the moment mindfulness returns.

At first we might catch it a little late. It's almost like sometimes the mindfulness returns behind our back. We don't see the mindfulness returning; suddenly it's like, "Oh, I think I was thinking a few minutes ago." So sometimes that happens, and then you're just there with what's happening in that moment.

But sometimes we can see the mindfulness returning. Sometimes it feels like it's kind of coming out of the mud. The more curious we get about this moment, the more we can begin to notice the moments right as mindfulness has re-arisen. There can be a kind of lingering memory, almost like a scent, of what it was like for the mind to not be mindful a few moments ago—kind of lost in a swamp or a swirl, or maybe a drifty quality.

And now, what is it like for mindfulness to be back?

Joseph gave this instruction at one point. He said, "Notice the difference between being lost and being present." And I went off and tried to explore that. I thought, hmm, I can't really know what it's like when I'm lost. But in that moment when mindfulness comes back, I have a kind of memory of what it was like to be lost. Because our mind keeps track of that, it kind of registers what preceded. So there's that recognition. And then there's this sense of, oh, awareness is here now.

As I started exploring this, I became curious about whether I could know as early as possible when mindfulness returns. And of course, you can't really do that—it's not something you can do because mindfulness just returns. But we can set the aspiration to catch it as soon as possible. And I found that this did have some effect.

There are great things about that moment. There's the beginning of seeing the quality of mindfulness itself. Because in that moment, the contrast between non-mindfulness and mindfulness can help us understand what the experience of being aware actually is.

The other great thing about that moment is that you didn't have to do anything to make it happen. You have become mindful completely effortlessly. That is a moment of mindfulness that you didn't have to work for. That was another piece I really cherished. It's like, ah, I didn't have to do anything for that—here is the mindfulness. And so it begins to point us toward a quality of easeful attention, this moment of mindfulness returning.

If we are not habitually beating ourselves up for having been lost in thought, we can catch something precious here. Because this moment of mindfulness returning is pretty quick—it doesn't last very long. And if we are habitually, as soon as mindfulness returns, thinking, "Oh, rats, I forgot to be mindful and I've got to come back to my breath," we've missed it.

But when Joseph gave that instruction to notice the difference, it was transformative. It did not matter how many times my mind wandered in a sitting. Anytime my mind wandered, it was just another opportunity to take in that effortless mindfulness when mindfulness re-arose. It cut through the judging mind so quickly for me to have that attitude around seeing mindfulness return. It was like, oh, I get to see

effortless mindfulness here.

This also has a benefit: as we notice mindfulness returning and become familiar with it, we become familiar with what it feels like to be mindful. Maybe we start to get that flavor of what it feels like to be mindful. In my own practice, as I attuned to that moment of mindfulness returning, I began to notice something. It was like getting familiar with that moment caused it to point itself out to me. It became easier to see mindfulness returning because I had been curious about it.

So often when mindfulness returns, we kind of latch onto something and start thinking about it. But this moment of mindfulness returning happens all the time. It happens throughout our day, not just in meditation. We're walking down the hill and maybe thinking about something, and then suddenly we're mindful again. Or we're in the shower, kind of lost in the pleasantness of it, and suddenly awareness is back. This experience of awareness returning begins to get familiar, and that familiarity helps us see it more clearly. And so recognizing this moment of effortless mindfulness returning is itself a way of cultivating mindfulness.

That's one piece of working with the edge of the wandering mind—just that we get to see mindfulness returning. That's been such a joy to explore.

And then there is this: the moment of mindfulness returning is already aware of something. We don't have to look for an object, because when mindfulness arises, it is connected to an experience. So when mindfulness returns, there is something that it is aware of already. If we can tune into that, it's simply, okay, mindfulness is back—what is mindfulness knowing in this moment? What's here?

Probably, or possibly, what's here in this moment is flavored by what had been happening when your mind was wandering, because of causes and conditions. Our mind charges out into memories and plans.

When the mindfulness returns, there's probably going to be some of that charge present. That may be what is most obvious, in fact. And so this is another thing we can be curious about in that moment. One way I frame this sometimes is: okay, mindfulness is back. I know that I'm aware. And what has been the effect of the mind having been lost? It's kind of like the thinking process, or whatever has been going on, has been shaping the mind while we weren't looking.

So in the mindfulness returning, it's useful to connect with and be curious about what's here now—which means what has been shaped by the last few moments of mind wandering. This might be, if the mind has been lost in an argument or a plan, that when we come back there's probably going to be some lingering feelings, emotions, or tensions. The reverberations from those thoughts. And it's really helpful to take a moment to step into that and know that.

Because if we jump over it and just try to come back to the breath, or try to come back to some other experience—whatever we think we should be being mindful of rather than what's actually here right now—if we jump over what's really actually here right now, something can be constructed in that

moment that might be relevant for us to understand. Sometimes after the mind has wandered, it has shaped attitudes and moods in our mind. And if we don't notice that—if our mind has gone off into an argument with a co-worker and we come back and just go, "Oh well, that's not important, I'll just come back to the breath"—that construct of the argument with the co-worker could have created in the mind an attitude of aversion and anger. And then that could be brought to the breath, brought to whatever we're paying attention to, without our being aware of it.

So it's really helpful to check in. Another phrase from Joseph Goldstein: What's the landscape that you're waking up into? The mind has gone off to some other planet when it's been wandering. Okay, what planet am I waking up on? What's the landscape of this planet? And no judgment about this—just curiosity.

I mentioned earlier there are different ways that the mind wanders. There's that kind of charging out. But there's also the drifting out, as I mentioned. Or there's a kind of getting lost in states of mind, spacing out or something like that. When mindfulness returns—and the more the mind settles and the further we get in our practice, just in general—sometimes when the mind wanders, it's not wandering into reactivity. It's wandering into love and compassion, or calm, or peace. And in the moment when mindfulness returns, again, that too will have shaped the mind.

When the mind wanders, sometimes it's not being pulled into something; it's more just a weakening of mindfulness. But sometimes the mind will wander into wholesomeness. The more we practice and the more our mind inclines in that direction, the more it might wander there without our participation. In fact, sometimes I think it's almost like the mind says, "Okay, I am sitting down and I am meditating and I'm going to pay attention to this. I'm going to be in charge." And at some point the mind just goes, "Hey, I know a better way. Let's relax. Let's find some calm." And my agenda to be here with this thing is like—the mind says, "Yeah, you do that. I'm going to go rest."

I've seen more often than I would have imagined that when I return from wandering, the mind is more settled than it was before I wandered. And if we are judging the wandering mind, we'll miss that. Because if we are judging or thinking it's a problem that the mind has wandered, that judgment will disrupt and ripple that quality of calm or wholesomeness that has been wandered into.

This is another carrot, hopefully, for being curious about that moment. Just: what's here? What planet am I on? Maybe I'm on the calm planet. And then we can begin to get familiar with that quality. Sometimes as the mind wanders into a state of calm or ease, it's finding its way to something quieter or subtler, and our mind doesn't quite know how to stay with it. But in the moment when mindfulness returns, that moment of being with—oh, here I am on the calm planet—it's like, oh, this is what it's like to be mindful of calm. And so that moment of returning, we may begin to touch into states of mind or qualities that

are more ephemeral almost, more diffuse qualities that may be a little harder to stay with at times.

And then there's the other side of the equation—the mind wandering out, getting lost. This one is

sometimes, especially early in practice, people say, "Well, there's no way to see that happening. It just happens." And yet, the more we get attuned to our mind, the more we can begin to be curious about the conditions in which we lose mindfulness. What happens? When does it happen? What are the states of mind, the familiar places, the things we're doing in which it happens?

Some of this happens by seeing where we wake up. If we wake up with the mind having been bored, it's like, "Well, maybe the mind gets lost in boredom." So we might begin, in recognizing where mindfulness returns, to be attuned to that state. "Oh, boredom's here. This is a place I tend to get lost." And it's kind of like we add just a little bit of interest to that. What happens here?

What I would not want to encourage in this exploration—this is a delicate place to explore—is that if we are trying to not have the mind wander, we won't see how the mind wanders. So for instance, around seeing something like boredom and noticing that you have a habit perhaps of the mind wandering in boredom, rather than feeling like, "Oh, boredom's here, let me double down and try to stay present, hold on to that mindfulness," it's more like curiosity. At least for me, there was a kind of curiosity: "Okay, what happens in boredom that the mindfulness lets go?"

That curiosity is what I'd like to encourage in all of these different ways. I'm going to go through several different ways that we might begin to explore places or ways that we lose awareness. Again, this is to support us to learn about our minds—not to judge ourselves. Because without exception, this is happening for everyone. You are not alone in your mind wandering.

One thing we can start to recognize is that the mind might lose awareness in particular activities or places. Locations. Maybe when we're washing our dishes, or doing our yogi job, or walking down to the meal, or going into our rooms. That's a great one. Sometimes we actively give it up there. It's like, "Whew, nobody can see." Shut the door.

Those are ones to explore. As you see, you might notice—what are the rabbit holes of mindfulness? What are the places it just goes away? These you'll often notice after the fact. You'll notice sometime later, "Oh yeah, here I am back again, and I know I was not mindful when I was in my room."

When we begin to recognize the places where we tend to be lost, often we might be aware as we're walking to our room, or heading to wash the dishes. Maybe we've been very present for our meal, but then something happens as we get up and go to the dishes. As you get familiar with the places that mindfulness gets lost, again, there can be added a little interest. What happens here? It's not, again, to try to force myself—stepping, stepping, stepping, stepping, opening the door, going in. It's not to try to force yourself. It's more about curiosity. What happens? What happens as I walk to the dish station?

What happens as I go into my room? Where does the mind get caught? What does it pick up on that it gets more interested in than being mindful?

What you might start to see is that whatever it is that the mind picks up on, we don't have to get lost in

that. It's almost like we have habits of getting lost in certain places or things, and so we might just be curious about that.

On one retreat I was doing this kind of exploration, noticing where mindfulness got lost, and I kept noticing that I would wake up into mindfulness staring at myself in the mirror. I never had noticed that I intended to look in the mirror—I didn't know how I ended up looking in the mirror. And so I got curious about that. Again, I didn't double down and try to stay. I wanted to just see what happens. When is it that I look in the mirror, and what's going on there?

I missed it over and over and over again. I would find myself staring at myself in the mirror. And yet I just kept that intention alive. I knew that heading into my room where there was a mirror, or heading into the restroom where there was a mirror, I'd be like, "Okay, let's see what happens. Maybe I'll get to see it this time." That was the way I approached it—not "I am going to make myself see it," but rather, "Maybe I'll get to see it this time."

At some point through this—and it probably took several days before I began to see it—I was just washing my hands, and it was a habit to look up. It was so subtle as a habit that it was just something I did pretty much every time I was in the bathroom washing my hands or in front of my sink. I would just look up. It was not that there was some kind of deep need to be seen by myself or anything like that. It was really just as simple as a habit.

One of the main places that we lose attention is when mindfulness shifts to a new object, to a new experience. We're sitting here knowing the breath or body or something, and then there's a sound of the turkey. We may be very mindful of that, but sometimes what happens is that we are so committed to staying with the breath that part of our mind thinks it's staying with the breath while the attention has actually shifted to the sound of the turkey. This is one of the primary ways our mind wanders—attention shifts and we haven't consciously recognized that shift.

This is one of the reasons why, in that form of walking I offered early in the retreat, I encouraged noticing the shift from seeing to looking, from hearing to listening. This is getting familiar with that shift of attention—seeing when the mind kind of goes, "Ooh, that's interesting." It's very similar in sitting. It might be that the attention shifts to some unfamiliar body sensation, or a sudden sound, a sneeze or a cough.

If we have an agenda in our meditation to stay with something, we might have either a kind of willful ignoring of those shifts or a yanking ourselves back from them. But we can simply be mindful when the attention shifts, just noticing. Getting familiar with seeing to looking, hearing to listening can help us understand that quality of what it's like when attention shifts. And because it happens so much, as we get familiar with it, it begins to point itself out to us. We can see the attention moving from thing to thing to thing. Then, as we see that shift, we don't have to have a sense of "the attention has shifted, let me come back to anything." It's like, "Well, the attention has shifted and I can be mindful of that now."

On one retreat I was doing this with the breath, and I began noticing that while I was with the breath, there was almost a little sinking of the attention—breath and attention very close and connected, and then this feeling of just a little sinking, the mindfulness letting go of what I had been paying attention to. Initially I was doing breath meditation, so it was like, "Oh, welcome back to the breath." I'd feel it sink, and connect again, sink and connect again.

At some point the mind was just curious—and this wasn't something I really felt like I did—but there was this sinking, and then the mind realized, "Well, I'm aware of this sinking. What's the mind doing? Where's it going?" So rather than trying to bring it back, I just thought, "Okay, it's going somewhere. Where's it going?"

going to one of those more calm, expansive states, it spread into something that was just so completely different—something I had not consciously experienced before. And it was that willingness to follow the attention rather than controlling the attention that allowed it to unfold.

I mentioned a little earlier that we might get lost in states of mind like boredom, and we can tend to get lost in familiar habitual states of mind—states of mind in which we tend to be identified. This is also useful to understand. Whatever the habitual patterns or habits might be—for me, I've talked a bit about self-hatred; this was one that I would tend to get lost in—to be curious and to learn skillfully how to work with that, seeing how the mind begins to head there and what it's like when it wakes up into that. We begin to learn something about those patterns at the edges of being lost in them.

And then there's the getting lost in states in which the mindfulness habitually gets lost, but it's not necessary to get lost. States like dullness, sleepiness, spaciness, zoning out. We might think that spaciness is inherently non-mindful, but it is just a state of mind. I would say it's a state in which we are habitually checked out, habitually not mindful. But it is possible to be aware of that state.

Sleepiness, for instance—we might have the thought in our mind, "I'm too something to be mindful. I'm too sleepy to be mindful. I'm too spacey to be mindful. I have such low energy, I can't be mindful." If you have that thought, you have enough energy to be mindful of it. Because you are mindful of it. You know it's there. You've just told yourself it's there.

It's a different kind of mindfulness. Often in those places or states, we have some agenda for how we want to be mindful. We want to be mindful in the way we want our minds to be mindful. We want to have everything clear and precise and know exactly what it's landing on. But it's more like the world is full of fog. And when it's a really foggy day here, you look down the hill and maybe you can see vague outlines of the buildings. You can't see things very clearly, but you know your eye is working. It's not a problem there. You're not trying to see the clarity of the building. Your eye is perfectly seeing the fog. It's pretty happy seeing the fog.

Similarly, when there is a low energy state like this, or a spacing out state, often the mind is much more

interested in that state itself. It's not interested in being precisely clear about all the various other experiences that are happening. It's interested in the fog. And it can know the fog.

I sometimes use the analogy of a mirror for mindfulness. A mirror just reflects what is in front of it. It doesn't care what it reflects, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, beautiful, ugly. The mirror is unaffected by what it's reflecting. In a similar way, our mindfulness can be unaffected by pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It just can know that.

And then consider the mirror in the bathroom after we've had a hot shower and it's all steamy. The mirror is coated with steam and we're standing in front of it. Maybe we think we need to do something, wipe the mirror off. But the mirror is still doing its job perfectly. It is reflecting every single drop of water on the mirror perfectly. It is just not doing the job we want it to do. And that's often what happens for us in those states of mind. There's some agenda we have. We want our minds to be a certain way. We want to have clarity. And that's not what our mind is doing in that moment.

And so if we can be curious about, well, what is it like to have a foggy mind? What is it like to space out? I had a kind of exploration around spacing out one morning. I was having breakfast and I kept noticing that the mind kept spacing out. My idea, my agenda at that point was that I wanted to pay attention to the eating—chewing and swallowing and tasting. And so I kept coming back to that. I'd notice that I was spacing out and I'd keep thinking, "Oh, come back, be mindful."

At some point, it kept happening. At some point I thought, well, okay, let's see. Can I follow the mind into spacing out? And I found I could. I could be with that. It felt like the mind hovered somewhere up here, this kind of buzzy quality. It was really pleasant. It felt really restful. And in being mindful of it, that's what I recognized. Oh, the mind needs rest. Again, it's kind of like the mind was saying, "Hey, you're working too hard. Whether you come along or not, I'm going to take some rest." And finally I let the mindfulness go with it. And in that, really felt into the rest. Within thirty seconds or so the mind had taken its rest, and then I was just with the eating.

Anytime there's a sense of "can't be mindful while something is happening," don't believe that thought. It's possible to be mindful of anything—except maybe non-mindfulness. But any state of mind, it's possible to be mindful of.

I have one last piece to share, and I want to bring it in at about this point in the retreat because sometimes—I've been talking about different times and places where we lose awareness. We lose awareness in certain places when attention shifts. We can lose awareness habitually in certain states of mind. And sometimes we lose awareness as the practice deepens. There are different reasons why this might happen.

There's a cycle that Michelle McDonald has called a purity-purification cycle. On a long retreat like this, we see these cycles. It's not just continually more and more easeful. I think you all know that by now. We

have cycles. Something settles for a few days, we're maybe in a place of calm and ease, and then something else happens and there's another storm.

Someone asked Sylvia Boorstein, "Why is it that the mind gets really calm and relaxed and then suddenly it's firing off all of these problems? Why does it do that?" And she said, "Well, it's kind of like in space there's all this space junk—satellites and things left over, the detritus from rockets we've sent up. There's a whole bunch of stuff circling the planet. And apparently when they fire a rocket, they need to be careful to make sure there's a good gap in the space junk." Those moments when it's really calm and easeful—it's kind of like sometimes some part of our mind says, "Oh, finally, there's space for me to come up."

As practice deepens, our minds begin to let go of their habits, and things that have been kept under pressure, things buried, begin to surface. So it's not a mistake when something challenging arises. It's that the conditions in this moment allow that to come up now. Sometimes that's what happens as practice deepens—something that has been submerged for a while just comes up. That's one way. Another way mindfulness can get lost as practice deepens—

And again, this has to do with something I mentioned earlier about the shift of attention. We're paying attention to a certain set of things that we're familiar with. Over time, we start to get familiar with what our bodies feel like inside, get familiar with the various sensations, and what our moods and emotions are like. So we're kind of familiar with a certain set of things. And at this level of experience, our mindfulness is attuned to that—we're familiar with looking at that stuff.

But what seems to happen, and this is my own take on it, is that as the mindfulness gets more continuous, it gets interested in subtler experience. And maybe it's experience, in fact, that we're not familiar with. So what can happen is we're familiar with this level of experience and mindfulness here, but as mindfulness becomes more continuous, it begins to gravitate toward something that we're not familiar with. And that's when mindfulness will slip out—because it's moving in the direction of experiences we can't even recognize necessarily.

So this can be an uncomfortable place in practice. It's like, I don't know what the mindfulness is paying attention to. It's paying attention to *something*. And so this is a place, again, where we may need to adjust. If you see, after a period of time where the mindfulness has been pretty stable and connected to experience, that suddenly the mind starts wandering, get curious about that. Don't double down and try to stay with what you're already familiar with. Because often in that place, as the mindfulness gets stronger, suddenly it seems like, wow, I was right there, and then it's just—what happened? The mindfulness got lost. And it feels a little confusing. We're right there, and then suddenly it's gone.

So if that starts happening, just be curious about this phenomenon. You might simply ask, what else is happening here? What's going on?

I explored this on one retreat where I noticed I was right with the breath, and it had been a few days on

one three-month course that I was able to stay with the breath. I'd sit down and just be right there. It was so easy. It was very familiar—every breath was familiar, and it was just so easy to be with. And then one morning I sit down and my mind is just all over the place. I hadn't taken a break from mindfulness or done anything different.

So at this point I just started getting curious. What is going on? And what I began to see is that very quickly, within one breath, the sensations of the breath—I just kind of got, so here's a breath, and very quickly that breath just disappeared. Within a breath, there was no breath anymore. And the mind would just slip out.

That helped me to understand something. At one point on a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, I said, "The breath is disappearing, so I'm turning to more obvious experience." And he said, "You don't have to do that. You just have to know the breath is disappearing. Just know that it's quiet. Just know that it's subtle."

I was like, really? And it was true. When I went back and tried playing with it, as the breath kind of went quiet, it was like, oh, quiet breath. And I didn't have to know all the precise details. My mind, again, had some agenda to know all the precise details of what the breath was. And it was no longer able to track that. But it could know that it had just gotten really quiet. And it could stay with that.

So again, I think that sometimes in this terrain, when the mindfulness starts slipping away after a period of steady practice, it may be turning towards something unfamiliar—something we're not as accustomed to meeting or being with. It could be a state of calm or concentration. That place where I finally noticed the mind slip from the breath and then opened into something vast and spacious—that was completely unfamiliar. It was a little startling. But it gave me a sense of how the mind can be mindful of things I don't know, things I'm not familiar with.

My main purpose in offering this is to encourage you to have some curiosity around this wandering mind. I also want to point out that an increase in wandering doesn't necessarily mean you've lost concentration and mindfulness. It can mean that the mind is attuning to subtler phenomena. It can take time for our awareness to come down to the level that mindfulness is operating at—for us to get in sync with what the mindfulness is wanting to attune to. Some patience during this time is often helpful.

And boy, do we get an education about our minds in this process—an education not only about our personal habits, but also about the conditioned nature of mind itself. This understanding is one of the doorways into deep freedom: seeing that it's all just conditioned processes at work.

Let's sit for just a moment.

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