Exploring the Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:19

It's nice to see you all in this form that we have, seeing all the tiles with your faces, scanning through and greeting you. It's really a privilege to be able to sit with you and to share the Dharma.

I think we're all in the teacher community appreciating the retreat. We meet each evening, and it's a lovely time for us as a community, as a teaching community, to check in. It's been a lovely retreat, so I'm appreciative of your practice and your commitment, your dedication to doing this.

This is not easy. You all know that it's not easy. We sit and we feel all kinds of stuff. Sometimes it's great. Sometimes we find concentration, we find some ease and some peace. And then the next sitting is completely different. Sometimes there's some stability of mind, more presence of mind. Sometimes the mind is wandering all over the place.

This is actually what I'd like to reflect with you about today: exploring curiosity about this phenomenon of the wandering mind.

The other day, Dawn said that things that seem like obstacles, that are in the way, can be a gateway to learning, to understanding, and to freedom. That includes all of our hindrances, our reactivity. We also often think of the wandering mind as being an obstacle. After all, what is the wandering mind but a loss of mindfulness? And that feels like an obstacle when mindfulness isn't here. But we can really get curious about this phenomenon of the wandering mind.

The other day somebody asked a question along the lines of, "Why does the mind do this?" It's a great question. There's not one answer. And I would say that this talk I'm going to offer is my own personal exploration of this question. It's a great question to let motivate you. Why does the mind wander? Check it out. See if you can learn something, rather than having a contentious relationship with the wandering mind—"Oh, the mind's been wandering," or "The mind feels like it's getting pulled to wandering." Instead, explore it. What is the wandering mind?

We use that phrase a lot, but there are different flavors of the wandering mind. Sometimes it just feels like the mind loses touch with the present moment and wanders out of it. Maybe that's why we call it wandering—it just kind of drifts. There's a drifting quality to it. Sometimes that drifting has a non-directed feeling, kind of floaty. Sometimes that experience is more like a charge out of the present moment. The mind picks up on some thought and just runs with it—active thinking, active reflection, a lot of charge in the content of the thinking. Sometimes the mind isn't so much thinking but is just pulled into a storm of emotional turmoil. This can include thinking, but doesn't necessarily have clear thinking to it. Sometimes

that wandering can be kind of calm, actually. That's an interesting flavor.

But all of these flavors, when we call it wandering mind, have in common that they're a state of low or non-mindfulness. So really, what we're exploring when we explore the wandering mind is mindfulness itself. We're exploring the comings and goings of mindfulness. This is a useful exploration.

We can't make ourselves—I think Sally said this the other day—we can't make ourselves come out of the wandering. We can't make it stop. When we're not mindful, we can't make mindfulness come back. It will come back. It will spontaneously come back. It will re-arise at some point due to causes and conditions, but we can't make it come back. What we can do is notice that moment when the mind wakes up, when mindfulness returns.

What we often call the wandering mind is actually mindfulness returning and noticing that mindfulness wasn't there a few moments ago. This is one of the things we can be curious about in that moment—curious about what the experience of becoming mindful actually is, curious about the experience of mindfulness itself. There's so much we can learn by exploring this phenomenon.

And without question, I'm pretty sure—I wouldn't say 100% sure, but pretty sure—that every single one of us deals with this phenomenon regularly. It's a pattern, a habit that we all share. It can be really useful to explore patterns and habits that happen a lot, and wandering mind happens a lot.

Having some curiosity about it, rather than a sense that this is a problem I need to get rid of, helps the mind begin to understand the causes and conditions that lead to the mind wandering, as well as the supports for remaining present. There are other things we can learn as well. In seeing the habit of the wandering mind, one of the things we often get familiar with are the main or key habits of mind that tend to pull us out of the present moment. Jack Kornfield talks about this when exploring the thinking mind—get familiar with your top three tunes, your top three favorite kinds of thoughts to have, and see if you can find a way to relate to those in a light way.

We begin to learn what our familiar go-to strategies are, our familiar strategies for navigating life. When we sit down to meditate, we may think we're going to stay still and present, but our habits, our conditioning, have other ideas. What we see when we see these patterns unfolding—all of these patterns that we explore in our practice—is how the mind wanders, the kinds of emotions that arise frequently. We are seeing our conditioning unfolding. We are seeing how our mind has been shaped. We're learning about our minds.

One of the key gifts of exploring the wandering mind is that we really get to taste, if we're open to it, how out of control the mind is—that we don't have so much say over when the mind wanders. Habits and conditioning will take us out of the present moment. Mindfulness will re-arise in some moment, but we didn't do that one either. We didn't have control over that either.

Seeing the comings and goings of mindfulness, watching the mind wander and come back, is a teaching

for us on the teaching of *anattā*, not-self. We sit down and plan to stay present. We have that idea or hope to be present in the moment. A few minutes later, we're off in thought. Who did that? Most likely you didn't actively decide to do that. It was habits, it was conditioning that led to that. And then mindfulness returns. Who did that? Again, not-self. There's so much evidence for this understanding of not-self, but we tend to view our experience from the perspective of self: "I'm going to be meditating. My mind wandered. I woke up again. I did that. I'm so good. I came back."

We tend to have that perspective of self, and when we're viewing experience from that perspective, it's very hard to see evidence for not-self. It's like a kind of delusion—the view or belief, the framing or orientation, the filter through which we see experience, this sense of self—almost prevents us from taking in the evidence for not-self. So every time the mind wanders, when that mindfulness returns: not-self. Not-self.

The other day, Bob mentioned the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. I'd like to share a little section of that sutta with you. Bob mentioned the aspect of the uncontrollability of our minds, and this is the part I'm pointing to here—that we don't have complete control over our minds. He pointed to this with respect to various areas or aspects of our experience, beginning with the body. The body is not under our control.

If it were under our control, we'd be able to say, "May it be like this, may it not be like that." And the Buddha explored this with several different areas of experience. One of those areas he called mental formations or volitional formations.

Volitional formations are a huge category of experiences that include thoughts, emotions, as well as wholesome mind states. Concentration is a volitional formation. Mindfulness is a volitional formation. And so there's a little piece in this sutta that's repeated for each of these different areas of experience. I'll read the one for volitional formations, but I'm going to replace "volitional formations" with "mindfulness," since mindfulness is a volitional formation.

Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were the self, it would not lead to affliction. It would be possible to say with regard to mindfulness, "Let my mindfulness be this. Let my mindfulness not be this."

Wouldn't that be nice? Anybody able to do that all the time? But precisely because mindfulness is not self, it lends itself to affliction. It is not possible to say, "Let my mindfulness be this. Let my mindfulness not be this."

Now, that maybe sounds hopeless. If I don't have control over mindfulness, what do I do? How do I do anything? Conditions will support the arising of mindfulness. And one of the conditions that supports the arising of mindfulness is recognizing mindfulness. It's sometimes said that the proximate cause for mindfulness is mindfulness. The teaching, or the hearing about mindfulness being helpful, is a condition that supports our interest in what mindfulness is. We start to get familiar with the experience of

mindfulness. That familiarity creates the conditions for more mindfulness. It's all unfolding lawfully.

You are fortunate enough to have heard about these teachings and been curious enough—curiosity was aroused through hearing that—and the practice began. It's all not-self. You're fortunate to be on this not-self path. We're all fortunate to have heard the Dharma and had the conditions that inspired us to engage.

So noticing this wandering mind—for me, this recognition that it's not my fault the mind wandered, this is conditions—and yet we take responsibility for our minds. Yes. Curiosity about this experience when mindfulness returns. This is a key way where mindfulness can be cultivated: recognizing that, noticing the return of mindfulness. This is one of the key areas of exploring the wandering mind.

We really can only explore the edges of the wandering mind, I'd say—the going, the coming out of it. We can notice the moment when mindfulness returns. That's like the edge of the wandering mind. We can see something about that moment. We can also see something about the going out of mindfulness. That one is a little more subtle, but it is possible. And so I'll talk about both sides, both edges of the wandering mind.

The easiest place to begin this exploration is that moment of remembering, the moment when mindfulness returns. We often have a conflicted relationship with this moment—a sense that I should have been doing it better. And again, that's picking up the belief that I had control. For me, that understanding of "this is not-self, it's coming and going, it's not-self"—that helped to frame the experience of the return of mindfulness with a little bit more allowing and acceptance. It's not my fault that it happened, but here I am, and the mindfulness is back. Awareness of that is supportive.

That moment when mindfulness returns—it is actually an amazing moment. It's got a quality that helps us begin to recognize what it's like to be mindful. If you're curious about it,

If you're beating yourself up about it, you miss the opportunity to get curious about mindfulness itself in that moment. When mindfulness re-arises, if you're simply curious about that experience of mindfulness re-arising, there's a kind of lingering memory, I'd say. It's like the mindfulness has re-arisen and there's the knowing: now I'm present. This experience is: I'm here. We have that understanding.

But there's also a lingering memory of what it was like a few moments before, when the mindfulness was not here. Perhaps there's a sense of the fuzz of being lost, or the wrapped-upness of the mind being caught in something, and the mind is kind of emerging from that. So there's a difference—a difference in the quality of the mind between what it was like a few moments ago and what it's like now. And it's not like you have to look back and think about it. It's almost right there in the moment of mindfulness returning. There's a sense of the difference. This is what it's like now, with mindfulness present.

So we get a taste or flavor of the experience of mindfulness there—what it's like to be aware. And that, as I said a few moments ago, mindfulness is the proximate cause for mindfulness. When we become familiar with the experience of mindfulness, it supports mindfulness in the future.

As we begin to get interested or curious about that moment of mindfulness returning, there was one point in my practice where I was just so curious: how early can I notice that mindfulness has returned? Sometimes it feels like the mind is coming out of the mud, or slowly waking up. And we're already a little ways into the waking up when we realize that we've kind of been mindful for the previous moments but weren't really aware that we were mindful. There can be a slow emergence from that.

But at one point I got really curious about how soon I could know that mindfulness had returned. And the more we get curious about that moment, the more it attunes us to that experience of mindfulness returning. The more we see it happening all the time—everywhere, not just in the sitting practice, but when we're walking across the street, or picking up a glass, or putting our hands in dishwater—suddenly there's this: here's mindfulness again.

Often we're not so attuned to that moment. We're more attuned to what we are aware of and what we have to do about it. But if we can be curious about the quality of awareness itself, that begins to help the mind attune or become sensitive to the returning of mindfulness. This creates more possibility for continuity to happen. We get more of these moments of mindfulness returning.

Another great thing about that moment of mindfulness returning is that it was effortless. You did not do that moment of mindfulness. It was completely effortless mindfulness. And that's a pointer to the possibility of what it's like to be present without working so hard. All of these things can be explored as mindfulness returns.

It's also useful not only to notice the mindfulness returning, but to be curious about what's going on in the mind. There's the mindfulness returning, and then there's something that mindfulness is attuned to. If the mind has wandered based on thoughts or emotions, if it has wandered out of the present moment based on some kind of reactivity, those thoughts have a very potent conditioning power on the mind. While the mind is wandering—especially when we're not aware of it—if some kind of hindrance or reactivity has taken hold, then without mindfulness, that has been shaping our experience.

When mindfulness returns, that experience is what we're waking up into—what has been shaped by that wandering. So rather than in the moment that mindfulness returns thinking, "Okay, I was using the breath as an anchor, let me come back to the breath as soon as possible," it can sometimes be really useful to be curious about what the mind has woken up into.

If you try to jump right back to the breath, and there has been some kind of reactivity shaped while the mind was wandering, that reactivity may get applied to how you're attending to the breath—if you're not consciously aware of it. So it's really useful to take a few moments when mindfulness returns. Notice that it has returned. Notice that experience. Oh, mindful again. And what's here? I sometimes use that question for myself, because sometimes when the mind wanders into

whatever—it's wandering into some whole world. Sometimes I've had the experience of waking up and it's

like, wow, this whole world or bubble had been created of experience. And it's like, where am I?

So sometimes I'll use this analogy: What planet am I on when the mindfulness returns? What is this place that I'm returning to? Just have some curiosity about that. Again, no judgment, but simply curiosity. What planet am I on? What has been the effect? The mind has been wandering—what has been the effect of that wandering on the present moment experience?

Now, you might think that often we would see great aversion, delusion, anger, frustration, irritation, annoyance that has been constructed while the mind was wandering. And sometimes we do. But the great thing about this particular curiosity of "what planet am I on" when the mindfulness returns is that the more we practice, the more experienced we become with the meditation, the more we settle into a retreat, sometimes we can find that when the mind wandered, it actually didn't wander into directed thought or some kind of reactivity. Sometimes our minds will wander into calm. We lose mindfulness, wandering into calm.

And when we come back, especially if we're not judging ourselves for having been lost, when the mindfulness returns we may ask: what planet am I waking up on? Sometimes it's planet calm. Sometimes there's more calmness, more ease after a wander than before.

When I discovered that, it was a great little carrot to being curious about what planet I was on when the mind returned from wandering. Because way more often than I would have expected, the mind did wander into more relaxation, more ease. It was almost like when the mind wandered, I was working really hard before—I was like, "I'm going to be present, I'm going to stay here, stay here." And the mind is going, "Yeah, you're working too hard. I'll show you how to relax. Let's relax." And it just does it for me. It just relaxed for me. And then the mindfulness returns, and it's like, oh yeah, that's a lot simpler, a lot more ease, a lot more relaxation. So sometimes when we return from a wander, it's not necessarily that the mind has gone somewhere problematic. What has been shaped might be calm, might be ease or peace.

So that's a little bit about the wandering out and coming back side of the wandering mind. The other side, the flip side, is getting curious about how and where we lose mindfulness.

Now, this kind of investigation is really light, a soft kind of investigation. Almost by definition, if you're trying to say, "Where's the mind wandering? Where's the mind wandering? How's it going to wander?"—you're kind of jumping on top of it. The activity of that doing, trying to see the mind wander, is either going to keep it from wandering or it's going to obscure what happens as the mind wanders. So this is a really light kind of interest or exploration.

Often what we do is notice what happens when the mindfulness returns. That is sometimes a clue to the kinds of things our mind wanders into. When we wake up, the planet we wake up on, that experience that we're having when mindfulness returns—that's sometimes a clue to the state of mind or the place or the experience that the mind gets hooked by and lost in.

So that curiosity around what planet am I waking up on is a real support for attuning to the experiences or states of mind that the mind can get caught by. As we see over and over again that the mind gets lost in a particular state—maybe it gets lost in frustration, or it gets lost in boredom, and you wake up with that sense of boredom—that waking up in boredom, checking into planet boredom, you get familiar with that experience. Then you might start to see planet boredom making itself before the mind wanders. And then you can be present with that.

There could be some choice points at that moment. At one point I noticed, while I was paying attention to the breath, a kind of going out, leaving the breath—like flattening or spreading or something like that.

The attention got drawn to something other than the breath. At that point, I was attending to the breath, and when I noticed that shift—the mind beginning to let go of the breath—I would bring the mind back. That's a choice. You can do that. It's possible. When you notice that kind of shift or a pull toward something, sometimes we can simply return to the primary object.

But at some point, this experience of the mind drifting out from the breath happened enough times. This was in one particular sitting. I'd seen it many times, and I came back, and I came back, and I came back. Then at some point, as the mind started to shift away from the breath again, there was this recognition: "Well, I'm mindful. I'm mindful of this—the mind letting go of the breath. Let's see where it wants to go. Let's see what happens." I let the mind follow that experience, and it opened into a kind of vast space of experience that I had not explicitly or consciously seen before. It was startling. It actually shocked me out of it. I thought, "What was that?"

So in familiarizing yourself with the construction of the planet, you could make the choice to return to something, or you could simply be curious. "Oh, planet boredom is arising. What's this about? What's that experience?"

This exploration around where we lose awareness can begin with a kind of inventory. What are the times of your day where mindfulness tends to disappear? Sometimes we lose awareness in particular activities, places, or things we're doing. That might be a curiosity worth exploring: What activities do I do where I tend to lose mindfulness? "Well, when I go into the kitchen to make dinner, that's where I lose it." Or, "When I take my walk for exercise, that's when mindfulness disappears." Be curious about it, not judging yourself, but simply noticing where those sinkholes or rabbit holes exist where mindfulness gets lost.

When you begin to notice those areas, I want to encourage curiosity. I've found that curiosity about this is the most powerful tool—not using that recognition of "my mind wanders when I go into the kitchen" to then grip tightly: "I'm going to hold my mind present when I go into the kitchen. I'm going to stay mindful for every single thing I do." That's an efforting way to approach it. You can do that. You can recognize this is an area where you tend to get lost and work hard to stay present. But often that hard work, that trying to stay present, obscures what is actually happening to make the mindfulness go away. And that's the invitation I'm offering here—curiosity about what has the mind wandering.

So as you walk into the kitchen or enter the activity, perhaps you're mindful. It's like, "Okay, I'm mindful now. I know I tend to get lost in the kitchen. Let's see if I can notice what hooks the mind." Maybe it's the first time something happens that you need to do quickly. Or maybe it's just habit—how you've always engaged in the kitchen. Maybe that's been a time when you've let your mind drift. So perhaps it's simply habit. Just be curious about what happens there, rather than forcing yourself to stay mindful. Be curious about what hooks the mind.

We also might lose awareness in particular habits of mind: boredom, depression, planning, remembering, anger. These can manifest as thoughts, as thinking, or simply as an energetic experience. Sometimes we get lost in the energetic experience as well as thoughts. But often with habitual states of mind, we get lost in the content of the thought. And that content has a stickiness to it.

It kind of pulls us into believing that we need to think about things from that perspective of the content.

So again, recognizing what we wake up into—what particular flavors of mind, whether boredom or fantasizing or judging or remembering—might give us a clue as to where the mind wandered. That familiarity with the experience as mindfulness returns may help us to notice the mind going into that state.

Another key way that the mind wanders, or that mindfulness gets hooked into something, is when there's a shift of attention. You're paying attention to the breath—that's where your conscious intention is, to notice the breath—and some sound arises. Maybe you kind of sort of notice the sound, but you're trying to stay with the breath, so you don't really acknowledge it. It's possible that shift of attention to the sound has more momentum or more energy to it than we're acknowledging or giving it credit for. And then the mind will wander.

The attention shifting without our consciously noticing that it has shifted—I would say that's one of the key reasons why the mind wanders. The attention shifts, and we haven't noticed it.

This is something we can start to get curious about. What is it like for the attention to shift? We can get familiar with that experience. And as we become familiar with what it's like for attention to shift, it's almost like that experience highlights itself for us. It will help us recognize when the attention shifts.

In the instructions for the practice we're exploring this week with the use of an anchor, this is actually part of the instruction. We stay with the anchor, but if attention is drawn to something else, we acknowledge it. We get curious about that shift. We recognize, "Oh, the attention has shifted." We take in what it shifted to, notice it, and then we have a choice. Once we've noticed that shift of attention, if it feels compelling, we may stay with it for a while. If it's not so compelling, we can simply return to the anchor. This noticing of the shift of attention begins to help the mind stay present.

There's another way attention shifts that I experienced this morning in the guided meditation. I hadn't quite articulated it this way before. I've noticed this experience many times but hadn't been able to

articulate what was going on. This morning the articulation appeared, which was lovely, so now I can share it with you.

It's a kind of shift of attention, but often we think of a shift of attention as looking at one thing and then looking at another thing. We're paying attention to the breath, then there's a sound, and attention shifts from breath sensation to sound and hearing. But there's another way that attentional shift can happen—perhaps more like what was happening when I described paying attention to the breath and then the mind expanding, leaving the breath and wandering into this expansive space.

There's a shift from where attention is focused, attending to something in particular—the breath, a sound, a body sensation—to something else entirely. Attention is not just one-dimensional. Attention can have that focused quality, but it can also be wide-angle. Attention can be broad and vast, taking in diffuseness, taking in wide experience.

That shift from attending to something specific to opening out—that's a shift of attention too. It's an attentional shift to a different quality, attending to a different kind of object, essentially. A shift from noticing something very precise to being aware of something very expansive.

At this point, the feeling of that shift is a very familiar experience for me. It's one of the main ways I allow my mind to settle—feeling into being with something and then feeling that shift into expansiveness. Being present for that, allowing the mindfulness to track into that expanding experience. It feels like a dropping, a spreading, a kind of expanding of mindfulness.

It also feels remarkably like falling asleep. It's a very similar quality. And so if you're not curious about this experience—it's like a drop and spread, almost. That's what it is for me; it may have different flavors for each of you. A dropping and spreading experience.

The attention shifting from focused to broad. You might think that you're falling asleep, or that your mind is getting sleepy or drifty or daydreaming. But if you can track it into that, it's like, oh, expansive mind is happening. Calm mind, diffuse experience is happening.

So that shift—there can be a shift from focused attention to broad attention. That can be another way the mind wanders, when you shift from that focus to something diffuse. And if we're not familiar with this experience, or if we're not giving credit to the experience of diffuseness and think it's just spacing out, then we may have an agenda or thought that, "Well, that's not mindfulness. I'm not used to that." But there are so many different flavors of what it's like when mindfulness is present.

So this curiosity about what is the experience, and am I aware? We often base whether we think we're aware or not on what kinds of objects we are experiencing. And when objects of different flavors happen—especially these diffuse objects, spaciousness, that kind of object—we may not have familiarity with being with them. And then we'll just get lost in that spaciousness. That's kind of how the mind can wander into calm sometimes, wander into spaciousness. It's very pleasant. You can end up just—have you

ever noticed that? Sometimes wandering mind where it's just really pleasant but not very mindful. It's not that it's an unwholesome state. It's that the mindfulness hasn't quite attuned to what it's actually like to be mindful in that state. It's possible.

I want to go into a little more depth with these diffuse states, because this is such a powerful place of practice. For myself, learning how to meet these diffuse states was one of the ways my practice really did begin to deepen into new terrain.

There are a whole bunch of states of mind that we might habitually get lost in—sleepiness, spacing out, zoning out, these kinds of states that we think of as non-mindful. But these states are not inherently non-mindful. They are more habitually non-mindful.

I'll give an example from my own practice. This was probably the first time I really clearly saw this. I was having breakfast and kept noticing while I was eating that I would space out. I was trying to be mindful while eating my breakfast, so I would bring my attention back to the breakfast—lifting the fork, lifting the food to my mouth, chewing—and I noticed the mind would space out again. So I just kept bringing it back.

But at some point, I thought, "Let's see if I can notice this mind moving away from focused attention to this spacing out." And it was possible. I had had enough practice with noticing diffuse states by that point. So instead of trying to stay with the breakfast eating, I thought, "Okay, so here's the spacing out." It kind of felt like the mind hovered somewhere up and to the right of my head. It was like this fuzzy, buzzing quality.

As I hung out there, I noticed I could be mindful of it. The mindfulness of that state let me recognize several things. One, there was a quality of pleasantness. There was a withdrawal from sense experience. And there was a deep resting that felt like it was happening.

That rest was the clue, actually. It was like, "Oh, the mind is so tired. It wants to rest." Well, okay, let me let it rest here. I'll be with it while it rests.

After about thirty seconds of resting, mindfully resting in that state—what I had been calling spacing out—after about thirty seconds of resting with that, letting the mind rest, it was like the fog cleared. That fuzzy, buzzing quality just dissipated.

And then there was a clarity of being with the body. The sense experience came back clearly. And as the sense experience came back clearly, it was like, "Oh, wow. The mind needed to take its rest, and it was going to take it whether I was on board or not."

That kind of seeing, recognizing that mindfulness could follow that state—there are so many states like this that we think we can't be mindful in. Fogginess, dullness, daydreaming, drifting, spaciness. All of these have this quality of being diffuse. And so the kind of awareness that we cultivate in being with that is this broad awareness, rather than the precise knowing of "I know what this experience is—there's this

sensation and that sound and that experience." There's a whole host of experience that's much less precise, and the mind can know it with this broader awareness.

So it's really worth exploring the edges of these states that we tend to think are not mindful, that we tend to think are inherently not mindful. Curiosity. Can I be with drowsiness? Can I be with spaciness? It's possible, actually. It's possible.

The last piece I'll mention—I don't have a lot of time for this, so I'll just drop it in there with a little encouragement to be curious. Sometimes we might start losing awareness as the practice deepens. When the mind suddenly seems less stable after a period of pretty stable mind, rather than thinking, "What did I do wrong?"—it often is an indication that something is shifting in the practice. There's something new happening, and the mindfulness is trying to find its way to meet a new experience. You're a little bit lagging behind, perhaps. Your agenda for what you're paying attention to may be lagging behind what the mindfulness is settling towards.

It is possible, after a period of time where the mind has been stable, for mindfulness to start really wandering. There are different reasons why that can happen. One of the reasons is that something old or deep, a kind of hidden old pattern or habit, is finally—it's like celebrating that there's enough space to be seen. It's like, "Oh, finally there's room for me. Okay, I'm going to explode." That can happen; that can definitely be one of the things that happens. But at the same time, well, okay—that pattern had to wait until there was a little more stability to actually come out. So some patience with that, practicing with that as we practice with difficulty.

But there's also the possibility of the mind orienting towards more quiet or more subtlety. At one point when I was practicing at Shwe Oo Min with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, I'd had a period of time where there'd been pretty consistent mindfulness, a lot of continuity of mindfulness. There'd been some intentionality to that mindfulness—the gentle reminding, this patient, gentle persistence of reminding myself to be aware. But it was pretty stable and pretty easeful. And then suddenly I started noticing, "Wow, the mind is all over the place."

That kind of shift, when there has been some stability and then suddenly the mind is all over the place—that's an interesting point. When that happens, pay attention. There's something, maybe something new happening. And so when I began looking at that, by this point it was kind of like, "Oh, okay. The mind is wandering. Let's see what's going on."

Rather than trying to track what I was aware of, it was more like a settling back in. "Well, what is the mind naturally aware of right now? What's it already aware of?" The slight agenda of staying present had kept the mind at a certain place, a certain level—yep, seeing, hearing, body sensations, vibratory energy, hearing—all of that the attention was tracking. But the agenda of tracking that was keeping the mind at a certain level, and mindfulness and wisdom were shifting to a subtler level of experience.

And that's what I noticed when I took away the agenda for the kinds of things I'm familiar with being aware of. Just asking, "Well, what is already here?"

Sometimes in that opening to what's already here, it may not be obvious. It may not be clear what's here. If you can just kind of hang in that space, that diffuseness, that non-specificness, maybe the mind will begin to recognize new kinds of experiences.

And that's what happened in this case. When I opened to what the mind is naturally aware of, it was a subtler kind of experience that the mind was naturally aware of. If I had been trying to effort my way through it—"Okay, I'm going to keep myself being mindful here"—it would have stayed at that same level, the things I'm already familiar with.

So there are often these shifts in practice where mindfulness will begin to orient toward experiences, toward states that we're not so familiar with. And that's a prime place where the mind can wander. So that kind of curiosity of "Well, what's here?"—it can be a little uncomfortable not to be familiar with our experience. It takes some trust. Like that time I described following the mind where it wanders, and it went to this vast space I'd never experienced before. It kind of shocked me out of it. But the next times it happened, I was more ready, more available to meet a new kind of experience.

I hope this is mostly an encouragement to be curious about the wandering mind. Let go of judging it. What does it have to teach you?

There's a lot in what I described that may sound like I'm encouraging you to do something, but really what I'm encouraging is curiosity and a very receptive mindfulness—to see what the edges of the wandering mind are like in any given situation. "Oh, the mind has wandered. Let's see what's here." It's not so much a doing; it's more of a receiving. And curiosity, I'd say, is our greatest support for this.

Let's just sit for a moment.

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