# Mindfulness of Difficult Mental States (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:05:23

It's quite something, what we're doing together. It's a rare thing in this world to be privileged enough to sit in a community, to participate with a community interested in understanding ourselves with the aim of lessening suffering in the world—to be curious about our own participation in that suffering and how exploring our own minds reveals our involvement in it.

This serves as a reflection of the tendency of the human mind to get involved in struggle: in greed, wanting things to be a certain way; in aversion, wanting things to be not a certain way; in confusion, thinking that having things a certain way will lead to lasting happiness for more than just a split second.

So I appreciate your commitment, your engagement with this. It is not easy to look internally at the way our own human minds get up to what they get up to. And the hope, the direction of freeing our own minds, even in small ways, from patterns and habits of greed, aversion, and delusion, will have an effect on the world. Because just like anger and hatred are contagious—when there's anger, it often gets met with anger, that mirroring being such a human tendency—that mirroring also operates with love and compassion and wisdom and joy. Cultivating the diminishment of the reactive and the growth of the beautiful will tend to expand beyond our own hearts and minds to those that we meet.

So thank you for what you are doing. It is an amazing thing. I appreciate that you are doing it. Sometimes when we're in the midst of this kind of work, we get so involved in the details of our own habits and patterns that we forget to appreciate the amazing value it has, not only for ourselves but for the world. It can be useful to remember that value, to appreciate yourselves. Even as you may be struggling with something, even as it may feel challenging, the very connection with that struggle is a beautiful thing.

Today I'd really like to explore that meeting of challenge. We've talked about it in a number of different ways. Bhante and Anushka in particular—Bhante spoke about the hindrances, and this morning Anushka talked about working with emotions, especially some challenging ones. I'd like to elaborate a little more on ways to work with challenge, much of this drawn from my own experience.

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. The first is the truth of suffering: that we tend to struggle, to react to things as they are. There is suffering—this is the truth of suffering.

The second noble truth is the truth of the arising of suffering. Sometimes this is translated as the origin of suffering or the cause of suffering, but the word can also be understood as "arising." The teachings say

that craving is essentially—the way I read this—that with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. It's a slightly different framing than "craving causes suffering," which makes it sound like craving isn't itself suffering. But with the arising of craving, suffering is there. That's a way that noble truth can read: with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering.

The third noble truth is the ending of that craving, which is the ending of suffering. There is an ending of suffering. The truth of the cessation of suffering—the cessation of craving is said to be the cessation of that suffering.

And there is a path leading to the ending, the cessation of suffering, the cessation of craving: the Eightfold Path. Essentially what we're teaching here, all the tools and practices we're exploring, are found in the Eightfold Path. We're practicing the Eightfold Path here in all that we do.

The Buddha encouraged us not just to take these truths as something to be believed, but he gave us actions associated with each of the Four Noble Truths. He said the truth of suffering is to be understood. The truth of the arising of suffering—the craving, with the arising of craving being the arising of suffering—the craving is to be abandoned. The ending of suffering is meant to be realized, directly experienced. And the path, the Eightfold Path, is meant to be cultivated, developed.

Winnie the other day talked about how the Eightfold Path weaves back and supports the Four Noble Truths—there's a kind of feedback loop there. If we think about these actions we're encouraged to undertake with respect to each of the Four Noble Truths, to understand suffering, then the tools in the Eightfold Path are means to understanding suffering. The engagement with and development of the Eightfold Path will support the understanding of suffering, will support the letting go, the release, the abandoning of craving, and will support the experiencing, the recognition, the realization of the ending of suffering.

The Eightfold Path provides the tools, the practices we use to engage with those first three noble truths. So this first noble truth: understand suffering.

Our whole path could be this, in a way. Just this one truth. If this teaching were all that we explored, it would take us a very long way. And so that's the emphasis for this evening—to talk about how we can understand suffering, how we can understand understanding in this way, the understanding that is referred to in this First Noble Truth.

This is not about intellectual understanding. It really is pointing to an experiential understanding. Understanding what's arising in this present moment. Is it suffering?

There are ways that the teachings point to everything that arises as suffering, in the sense that everything that arises is unreliable. That's another translation for the word dukkha. We often translate dukkha as suffering, yet it can also be translated as unreliability. And so there are times when the teachings seem to say that everything that arises is dukkha. My understanding is that what this means is that there is

nothing that arises that's reliable as a place for lasting happiness, because it is impermanent, falling away, changing.

As we have said several times over the last few days, there's nothing out there that we can hold on to that will make us happy, that will be that lasting happiness. And so in that sense, everything that arises is dukkha. Everything that arises is unreliable. Everything that ceases is unreliable experience. Just unreliable experience arising and passing away.

And we get in there and mix it up, try to hold on to it, try to push it away, try to figure out how to create a particular flavor of conditions so that we can feel happy for a little while. Then it falls apart and we get frustrated. What did I do wrong? It's either my fault or somebody else's fault. Must be because everybody else seems to figure out how to be happy but me.

The resistance to the unreliable nature of experience, the impermanent unreliable nature—the confusion in our minds about thinking there would be something out there that's reliable—that's where another kind of dukkha, the experience of suffering, comes in. And this is often in the realm of our reactive habits and patterns, habits and patterns based in greed, in aversion, in delusion.

So we explore: what is the experience when we are experiencing struggle, stress, frustration? What is the experience of that? The Buddha pointed us to the meeting of that as being the path.

We've also said this a lot: the word hindrance sounds like, and does, when those states of mind are operating in their own nature, when they are running the show for us—they are hindering our capacity to settle. But when we meet them with mindfulness, when we meet any reactive habit or pattern, any stress or suffering with mindfulness, it's no longer in the way of the path. It is the path.

I've heard my colleagues say this over and over again, and it bears repeating: these difficult patterns, when they arise and can be seen and met with mindfulness, with wise mindfulness, with the perspective that Winnie spoke about—the wise view and wise intention—whatever arises is our path.

And it's not always easy to meet whatever arises. I've spent—I don't even know how many years now, twenty-some years doing this—and it's not easy. But I will tell you, it is worth the trip. It is worth the ride.

One thing I'll say: we often explore working with difficulty, using tools or an antidote, for example, something that takes our attention away from it at times. Sometimes we do have patterns in our experience that feel very strong, and it can be useful to use some of the tools we know to settle that or turn our attention away. I'll talk about some of those this evening.

But sometimes we can jump to those tools too quickly and not give ourselves the opportunity to explore whether we might be able to meet it with mindfulness. The idea that something is too strong, the idea—if you've ever had the thought, for instance, "I'm too sleepy to be mindful." Anybody had that thought? I see a few willing to raise their hand. "I'm too sleepy to be mindful."

I would just like to propose that if you're having that thought, you're already aware that you're sleepy. That awareness is already there. So give yourself a chance. We have more capacity than we give ourselves credit for sometimes.

I'd like to offer a few things I've found useful in exploring how to work with difficulty, how to find a balanced mind amidst difficulty. These approaches have helped in my own practice to expand the terrain, we could say, where mindfulness can go. So that thought of "I'm too X—I'm too sleepy, I'm too angry, I'm too frustrated, I'm too anything to be mindful"—that thought can be met with the confidence that mindfulness can meet any experience.

Perhaps not always. There are times when whatever is arising, the momentum or the power of the reactivity can be stronger than our capacity to be mindful. And so there's some wisdom that we have to cultivate about whether mindfulness can meet this. But give yourself a chance to check it out. We'll talk about that a little bit too.

I would say that one key tool in my own toolkit around working with difficulty is the confidence that mindfulness can meet any experience. Whether or not I have that capability in this moment, it is possible. And so that gives me the confidence to play with it, even for a few moments, to play with that possibility of meeting something with mindfulness.

This evening I'd like to primarily explore meeting difficult emotions, reactive habits and patterns, difficult mental experience. Often with some of our really charged mental experiences, they feel like they come in layers. A lot of different pieces coming together. Beliefs about things, old emotions coming up, emotions that get woven together. It sometimes can just feel like a big ball of a mess.

So one of the things that can be really helpful is to start with a sense of curiosity. Often the old reactive habits and patterns are coming out of deep and old conditioning, often from family, childhood situations with playmates or family members, or trauma that happened all through our lives. All of that participates in some of these patterns.

And so the curiosity is not about thinking "how can I get rid of this?" Again, the idea is that whatever is arising, this is the path. The mindfulness of this is how the learning develops, how the wisdom grows, how we begin to understand that craving is suffering. That the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. It's not something that is a block to the progression on the path.

Myself, I've worked with a lot of self-negativity, self-hatred being one of the big ones for me. And I remember on one three-month retreat, it was coming up quite a lot. At one point, I just kind of thought—and this was delusion—I thought, "Oh well, I guess I don't learn anything. I guess I just have to deal with this. I'm not going to get enlightened on this retreat." That was the idea that somehow the self-hatred was blocking the development or growth of wisdom.

But fortunately I was willing to work with it. And to my surprise, at one point, there was really deep

seeing of the impermanent, unreliable nature of the arising of that self-hatred. Right in the midst of seeing self-hatred there was really clear understanding. And that moment was a powerful moment in my practice to help me have the confidence and the sense of, yes, I want to meet these habits and patterns. It's not like they're in the way. Deep understanding can arise in the midst of seeing self-hatred. I didn't have to wait until the self-hatred was gone and I'd had a long time to settle in concentration with no hindrances arising for weeks. Right in the middle of self-hatred, deeply seeing the impermanent, unreliable nature of the thoughts that were generating it.

So that's a little pep talk. Go for it.

Curiosity is one helpful tool. Can we be curious about these habits and patterns? It can also be helpful to remind ourselves of some of the wise view that Winnie talked about the other day. This is the framework for our mindfulness practice—wise view.

"This is nature." This is a really helpful framing for the experience. This is nature. This framing comes from one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and my understanding of what he's pointing to with that language is that what's arising in this moment is a natural arising. It's arising based on causes and conditions, things that happened in the past. It's arising based on what's arising right now in the present moment. It's arising based on how I'm relating to it in the present moment. What's growing right now, what's arising, what's coming into being right now—it's nature. A relationship of cause and effect unfolding in this moment.

Just reminding ourselves of this can be helpful. Sometimes I frame this to myself as, "Well, of course this is arising." When I got to the point where I could say that about self-hatred—"of course this is arising, look at the history, look at the conditioning, look at what happened and how the mind related to it in my history, of course this is arising"—instead of feeling somehow like I was to blame for it arising or I was responsible for it arising.

That recognition—that it was nature—really allowed a lot more possibility for just being able, or willing, to witness it. "Oh, yeah, self-hatred is arising right now. This is what it feels like. This is what's happening with it." So sometimes just that framing, if you're working with something challenging: "This is nature. This is causes and conditions. Of course this is arising. I'm bringing curiosity to it."

With curiosity, with a sense of willingness to explore experience with mindfulness, then we're in the terrain of investigation. Looking at, exploring, meeting experience as it shows itself.

Often with these really reactive habits and patterns, with all of those layers and complexity, sometimes we think we've thought our way through it a little bit. For me with the self-hatred, I had kind of thought my way through it: "Well, you know, probably this has to do with those situations, and it's got to do with this thing that happened. So there must really be that thing underneath it." I had kind of thought my way through it, and sometimes when I sat down to practice, I was like, "Let me find that thing in the

middle"—rather than asking, "What's presenting itself this time around as self-hatred arises?"

That approach—"What's here with this pattern that's arising?"—embraces the big mess of it. Sometimes I think about these big habits and patterns as being this huge, wound-up ball of a mess. And rather than trying to pull it all apart and figure out all the threads and pieces wound up in there, it's like, with really wide arms, can I just hold the whole thing? Just meet that, whatever is showing up in this moment. What's here? What's obvious about this experience right now?

We might be making assumptions about what's happening in the middle, and those thoughts will arise, those ideas: "I really think there's fear in the middle of this. I've got to find the fear so I can be with the fear, and then the whole thing will fall apart." You hear some greed in that? It's like, okay, well, what is here? What's available?

You can hold those ideas about what might be in the middle—maybe there is fear, maybe. But rather than looking for it—because if you go looking for something, sometimes you'll find it, and the finding of it sometimes happens because we're making it happen—really, hold those ideas lightly. That's a hypothesis, but let's just see what's here. Let's just meet what's actually here. Meeting what's obvious about the whole complex experience.

Sometimes I approach this with an image that I first learned from Gil Fronsdal, though I think it's a pretty common thing for Dharma teachers to talk about, so he probably got it from one of his teachers. Thinking about the practice of mindfulness as being like a naturalist. We are, after all, nature. We are observing nature as we observe our hearts and minds, as we meet our experience with mindfulness. We're observing the nature of a human being.

A naturalist, when they go out in nature, tends to go to the area or kind of nature they're interested in exploring, interested in understanding. So this is about understanding—we're looking at understanding something, understanding a habit or pattern, understanding nature. Going out into nature, they'll find a place to sit in the forest, or in the desert, whatever it is. And they'll just sit and watch what happens.

They may pick their place to sit based on what they're interested in learning about. Maybe they're interested in studying the habitat of a redwood forest—what kind of creatures live there, how do they live, what do they eat, how do they interact? And so that naturalist would put themselves in a redwood forest and just observe. What creatures come out? How do they interact? Where do they forage for food?

The stiller they are, the more they get to see nature in its naturalness—what is wanting to arise. If they're going in and digging holes to see what's living in that hole, they're not going to see how those creatures live naturally.

And there is a place for that kind of science, right? We may cut up a plant, take it back to the lab, put it in the machine, pull it apart, look at the cells. There's a place for that. And there's also a place for seeing the bigger picture and just meeting nature as it shows up.

That comes with stillness for the naturalist—sitting and just being willing to be still enough that nature begins to trust the observer and to show up as it does. Our practice can be like that: non-interfering. The mindfulness can have that quality of not interfering, just allowing what wants to show up. Not digging into that big ball of many layers and threads, but simply asking: what's here? What's most obvious?

There are a few explorations that can be useful in that place, aside from noticing what is obvious. It might be looking a little more closely—as you might sit a little closer to a redwood tree, but then remain in stillness. How does it feel in the body? Anushaya really spoke to this this morning, so I won't go into a lot of detail, but just that curiosity: What is this pattern, this habit? How does it feel in the body? What are the sensations?

Often there's a particular contraction in the stomach, or tension in the shoulders, or clenching in the jaw. There can be very specific sensations associated with, for instance, anger. Anger might have a feeling of pressure and heat rising in the body, tension or clenching in the throat, a tightening in the face, a distortion of the face. We might notice some very specific sensations—things we're familiar with landing with. Particular pressure, particular body sensations.

And then there's another area of experience in the body. I found myself speaking about this in quite a few meetings in the last few days, so I want to bring this in too. There's a broader feeling of the whole—the whole feeling, the whole mess of what's happening right now.

This is a kind of experience that's not so commonly valued or taught in many of our families. I certainly didn't learn it. I learned how to be with pressure on my hands—it's pretty easy to be with certain kinds of sensations, like pressure or contact, hands touching, or a clenching of the jaw. Very discrete kinds of experience, almost like you could draw a line or a circle around a particular area. The contact points of your hips against the cushion or chair or bench, feet on the floor, contact of hands—these are sensations we know how to touch.

Some people also have a sense of what I recently learned a word for in Western psychology: interoception, the internal visceral sense of the body. This I did not have much experience with. And this kind of experience, especially with reactive emotions, has a much broader, more pervading quality. It often doesn't have the sense of something we can draw a line around. It often feels very, very big, kind of wobbly. It doesn't have a lot of familiarity to it sometimes, if we're not accustomed to meeting this kind of experience.

Our awareness can meet specific experience. When we touch our hands together, we can know those sensations. So it's almost like our awareness can narrow down to a very precise focus. Awareness can also be very broad and take in a very broad experience. Sometimes when we go broad with awareness, it takes in a sequence: a sound, then a body sensation, then another sound, then an emotion coming up, then a pressure or a tension. So in a broad awareness, we may be receiving a wider range of experience, but it still has that very precise quality when we experience something—a specific sound, a specific pressure in

the knee.

But then there's also this quality of a diffuse, broad, pervading feeling that can be met with a broad awareness. I'll give you an analogy in the field of seeing. If you go out on a moonless night with a dark sky, here at Spirit Rock we can sometimes see the Milky Way when there are no clouds. Seeing the Milky Way is that kind of diffuse experience. The vastness of the Milky Way isn't taken in by focusing on a little part of it. The awesomeness of the Milky Way arises because we're taking the expanse of it in. Our minds know how to meet expansive experience.

Just there's some areas of expansive experience perhaps that we haven't gained familiarity with meeting. And in my own experience, in my own practice, this area of the expanded feeling around emotion was one of those—unfamiliar territory. It can have that Milky Way-like experience. Or maybe even more analogous, like the Northern Lights. I've never personally seen the Northern Lights, but I've seen videos of them, and they kind of shift and change. The Milky Way is apparently static—it's not static, but from our point of view here on Earth, it looks kind of static. Not a lot of change up there. But the Northern Lights do this weaving and intensification of color.

The experience when we meet a broader feeling of our emotions has that kind of quality. Not a lot of stability. Kind of a wobbly feeling. Maybe a slippery experience.

Maybe right now, just as I'm speaking, can you just touch into how you are? One way into this is just whatever you're experiencing—because this isn't just available with emotions, it's actually available all the time. It's maybe a little more obvious with strong emotions. But whatever you're experiencing right now, just taking in, letting yourself settle with how you are—that's a way in. It's like, how am I right now? In the big picture, how am I right now? And how does it feel? Not the precise sensations, but the whole thing. All that's here. How does the whole thing feel? The feeling of it?

There may not be words for it, partly because it can be a pretty shifty, dynamic experience. Sometimes it can be diffuse and vague. Sometimes it can be pervading and strong. So just see if there might be a possibility of touching into the whole, the big picture of how you are in this moment. All that's happening right now.

It often can have a shifty quality—shifting between pleasant and unpleasant and neutral really quickly. It doesn't really land with any one experience too quickly. It can be hard to put words to.

With emotions, this feeling, if we can touch into that place, it can be hard to stay with, maybe partly because we're not so familiar with staying with something so imprecise. And so you can just play with it a little bit, exploring: how is this with the body? What is the whole experience of this with the body? Just see if you can touch it for a few moments. And then just go back again to what's obvious.

But in my own exploration of this particular aspect of emotional experience, as we gain a capacity to rest with it, to land with it, there's a lot of that shifty landscape of the big mess of it that becomes available to

be touched. And sometimes so much of our reactivity—our launching out of that into thoughts and justification and reactivity—is coming from that really shifty landscape of experience.

So it may be possible to touch into it. If you gain some sense of being able to meet that broad, diffuse, shifting landscape of an emotion, it can be useful in another kind of investigation. Again, we're talking about investigation of emotions through the body. It can be interesting, while holding that feeling, to just be curious: Anything here want to show up? Anything else want to show up? Anything else available? Not to look for it, but just to be inviting. What else might be participating in this show?

That may begin to touch into some of the deeper patterns or conditioning around the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience.

"Oh, I don't feel safe." Or, "Wow, I'm really vulnerable." Or, "This is not okay." Something may arise with that touching into the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience. And the seeing of it—if it can be held with mindfulness, the seeing of that whole thing can be very healing. Very healing. Bringing a lot of capacity to meeting this kind of difficult emotion.

So mostly I've been talking about just meeting the experience, with a little bit of exploring perhaps a different piece of the experience that may not be so familiar. First of all, what's obvious? How is it in the body? And then this more pervading feeling.

Another exploration that can be really useful around challenging states of mind is checking into how we are in relationship to it. For myself, with self-hatred—self-hatred arising—I carried so much aversion to that self-hatred, so much of a sense that it was a problem that it arose. And that part wasn't being seen. When there was the capacity to see that, to see, "Oh, there's self-hatred, and there's thinking it's a problem"—there's a difference between the challenge, the difficulty, and the relationship to it. And sometimes the relationship to it is really driving the show. The thinking it's a problem to have self-hatred was leading me to certain kinds of exploration about it in order that it should go away. Not the curiosity of, "What is this?" but something else entirely.

And then beginning to see, at times, the possibility of a relationship to it that's more one of curiosity, interest, patience. So these are two kinds of relationships to experience. There might be a relationship of aversion or greed—wanting something to happen, wanting something not to happen. Or there might be an attitude of patience or calm or interest, willingness to be with it, faith, confidence.

When I found that relationship—and that relationship actually comes by seeing the relationships that are in the way—the relationship of ease, of peace, of curiosity, of patience, we get to find that place by noticing that it's not okay. So that same pattern of seeing what's here holds true here. But it has to be seen.

I think often these attitudes or relationships to experience are hidden. They're below our conscious awareness. And so sometimes a little check-in can help. Like, "Okay, this is happening. This pattern, this frustration is happening. What's my relationship to this? How am I with this?" That can be something that,

again, not trying to figure it out, but just that little curiosity about—is there a relationship to this? What's the relationship to this? Not trying to find it or figure it out, but sometimes just that invitation. It's more of an invitation. "Any relationship want to show up? Any relationship want to let me know you're there?" That kind of thing.

Sometimes it will show up. And you'll be like, "Oh, that's what's going on. I think this is a problem. I think this shouldn't be happening." Then it becomes something we can be aware of. It becomes something else, like, "Oh, what's going on is that frustration is happening and thinking it's a problem is happening. That's what's going on." And how does that whole thing feel? How is that in the body, that feeling of "it's a problem"?

So there are times when settling back and having this kind of exploration of what's here, what's obvious, isn't so easy. The momentum of the habit or pattern is a lot stronger than our capacity for just being with it. And so I'd like to offer just a few tools here, some things that can support some measure of being with it.

There is, you know, the redirecting of attention away from difficulty, which I'll get to in just a moment. But first, there are a few tools that exist somewhere in between active investigation—that deepening into holding what's here, meeting it, seeing what wants to show up—and simply redirecting attention elsewhere.

Sometimes sitting in nature, the naturalist sitting in nature, a forest fire comes through. You're not going to just sit there. It's like, "Oh, forest fire coming through." You need to do something. So sometimes we do need to take action. There's a middle ground between the forest fire coming through and just sitting quietly.

One tool I've found really useful is quite simple—a simple approach for working with patterns that tend to be ones that come back a lot, ones that repeat. For myself, I kind of stumbled into this tool while working with a repeating pattern of depression. Not a very intense depression, a kind of low-grade depression that was coming up a lot on one retreat.

At some point, I'd been doing a lot of investigation and diving in, but I realized that it was much more supportive for the practice to do something really simple with it. Just to notice—and Bhante mentioned this the other day, actually—just to notice when it's there and when it's not there.

When something's coming up a lot, I wasn't doing a lot of investigation because the mind wasn't able to really settle with it that much. But it was able to know: yep, there it is. Yep, it's there. I could know it was there in an almost very stepped-back, broad way. But also to recognize when it wasn't there. Because with these more pervasive habits and patterns, sometimes we can have a kind of subconscious belief that it's always there. We don't actually notice that it disappears, that we're not living in it constantly.

So that piece of inquiry—is it present, is it not present? Depression present? Not present?—I found there were a lot of times it wasn't present.

Then I began to see that when it was present, there were two distinct experiences. When I could recognize, "Yes, depression is present," there was noticing that depression was present and it wasn't a particular problem. It's like, "Oh yeah, I can know that. Yeah, that's what's happening right now. The mind feels kind of low." Not a lot of reactivity to that experience. And there were times where it felt like it was a problem. Times when I could be aware that it was present and it was just present, or I could notice that it was present and I was caught by it.

So I began just noticing the difference: caught by it, not caught by it. Caught by it, not caught by it. Often when we're caught by it, it's because there's some attitude in the back of the mind that's not clearly seen. So "caught, not caught" was just a simple way of acknowledging there's some attitude there. I don't really know what it is, but it feels like something's off. Caught. Not caught. Not here. Here. Caught. Gone.

In this exploration, through this very simple three-part inquiry—not diving in, not looking in detail—it began to be a very dynamic experience. Depression kind of there, and then vanishing. And then, oh, it would be back. And then I would get caught by it. Sometimes it went really quickly between those states, sometimes more slowly. But when I began to be okay with this pattern of being caught by it, being not caught by it, not there, I began to see just how dynamic it was. That was such a helpful tool. A really simple noticing around it, not a lot of detailed investigation.

Another tool that can be really useful is one that allows something challenging to be present without focusing on it directly. It's not quite going so far as "the forest fire is here and you need to get out," but there's something happening and it feels pretty sticky.

The depression was like this too. I discovered this tool around the depression as well. I just began to realize: well, yeah, the depression is there, but there are thousands of other things going on.

It was as if the mind had taken the depression and made it the biggest thing. I was looking at the depression, just buried in it. But when I took the mind up out of it, I could see that yes, there was a lot else going on right now.

So I consciously brought in a reminder for myself. Seeing is happening. Hearing is happening. I cycled through the senses a little bit. Yes, there's seeing, there's hearing, there's feet on the ground—oh, and there's the depression. And there's seeing, and there's hearing. Just rotating through other experience to remind myself that the depression was not everything in my experience.

Because that kind of magnetizing to the experience makes it explode and become really big. So this is simply putting it back into the context of the entirety of our experience. That can also be really helpful.

And then there are times when we really need to turn our attention away from something, when it's not helpful to try to be with it. I use a rough guideline: if I can be with something with mindfulness, even in this simple way of noticing present or absent, caught or not caught, and it feels like it's staying at about the same level—not amping up when I'm trying to be with it—then I'm still in the terrain of learning with it.

But if it feels like the dial gets turned up to ten when I try to pay attention, if it just goes screaming off the scale, that's the time to say, "Yep, not the time. Not the time to be with that."

It's really helpful to cultivate something neutral to let your attention go to. For myself, I often use my feet on the ground. Walking meditation with attention to the feet can be good because there's a little bit of movement happening. I found myself working with this around anger. I would notice the mind getting into anger and it would just get so stuck. If I tried to be mindful of it, I would just get lost in it for long stretches of time.

So when I noticed that was happening, I would bow to that experience. "Yes, I see you, anger. I know you're asking for attention. I'm sorry mindfulness isn't strong enough for you right now, but I'll get back to you. And right now we're going to pay attention to our feet." It was a very kind redirecting of the attention. The kindness there is important, as opposed to, "Can't be with that, gotta go somewhere else." A kind redirecting of attention to something neutral can be really helpful at times, along with some discernment about when that approach is necessary. Is it possible to be with experience?

To end, I want to say what I said at the beginning: working with these difficult patterns and habits is not some kind of lesser practice. It really is where wisdom can grow—right in the midst of something. For me, it's so mind-blowing. Seeing in the midst of self-hatred: this is just a thought. Thoughts being believed and producing this whole show right in front of my eyes. It's just a construction of mind. Seeing not only that this was a construction of mind, but that everything in our minds is a construction of mind. Such deep understanding can happen right in the middle of looking at these difficulties.

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