Wisdom and Trust

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 41:20

At times when mindfulness gains momentum, mindfulness and wisdom can see more of the processes unfolding inside. As has been said, and as we've pointed to, wisdom begins to take the lead in the practice. It feels much less like we're doing the practice, like we're guiding or directing what's happening. We can start to see the natural unfolding of wisdom—seeing conditionality, seeing impermanence, understanding the unreliable nature of experience.

A while back, I talked about noticing the job description of some of our mind states—noticing the job description of aversion, greed. I also mentioned noticing the job description of the wholesome qualities: How do they act? What do they do? There's a kind of trust in this, that we see how these mental formations are functioning. We're not doing them. We're watching their nature unfold.

We can also get curious and see how wisdom does its job. We can recognize how wisdom functions, seeing the release of suffering, understanding dukkha. That may be the key job description of wisdom: to understand and release dukkha. So seeing this, seeing understanding arise, witnessing the release—at times we feel it in the moment. Yesterday I talked about the gradual nature, that sometimes we don't see the release. We just recognize in retrospect that something has disappeared. And in that moment we see the wisdom, the understanding that something has been released, that something is not being picked up.

This deepens the trust, recognizing that wisdom does its job. We're not responsible for this understanding to happen. In fact, there's usually no way we could figure out how to release dukkha. I remember sitting in the meditation hall at one time, noticing the clinging to something, feeling the suffering of that clinging. And the thought that arose in my mind was, "I would let go of this if I knew how." So it's really clear sometimes that we don't know how to let go. And the seeing of wisdom doing that begins to bring a lot of trust to the practice and the natural unfolding of this practice.

We do begin to trust more and more the non-interference, just the witnessing, and the patience. We begin to trust this natural process, the gradual nature of the path. And there are some edges to that trust at times, where we run into things. Our practice reveals things that kind of throw us back a little bit. They make us feel like, "Wow, is this really trustable? Can I trust the mind here? Maybe I should start doubling down and trying to do the practice again, as opposed to just receiving, just witnessing. Maybe I should direct the attention to something."

There are a couple of edges I want to point to—places where we may tend to think we need to bring in effort. And maybe it's a place of patience, to begin to learn with whatever is there.

One thing I'll mention is that sometimes when the mindfulness gains momentum and there's a little more continuity, we start seeing gaps in our mindfulness. We start recognizing the mind slipping out more. Sometimes it can feel like the mind is wandering more. It can slip into thought or slip into imagery or random thoughts. At one point, doing some walking meditation, the mindfulness got more continuous and I could see just these little jumps—mindfulness going out to something and then dropping back, losing mindfulness for a couple seconds and then coming back, a couple seconds and coming back. Really seeing the in and out of mindfulness.

We may have a tendency in these times of seeing more slipperiness of mindfulness, or the mindfulness kind of getting lost, to amp up the effort. "I need to hold my mind present." There can be a place for that. It's an interesting recognition, a difference in the quality of how the mind is slipping out.

You know, if the mind is charging out of the present moment and getting caught in things, that may well be a time for more effort—perhaps effort to notice the caught part of things. And sometimes the slipping out feels more like... it just feels slippery. The mind goes to nothing particularly sticky. It just loses mindfulness and drifts to a quiet space, getting lost in that.

So it may be the quality of where the mind goes when it slips, and some of that is revealed when mindfulness returns. When mindfulness returns, is it calm and easeful? Or is it caught in something?

In my own practice, what I've come to explore in these places where mindfulness slips out is to at least take some time, when I first notice that, to have curiosity about the slipping. Not to try to hold myself present, not to try to hold on to the experience, because that very activity of effort may obscure the subtlety of what's happening in the slipping. And we can see this—it is possible to see what the mind is doing. It can take patience, sometimes seeing a slip over and over again.

This lesson was really brought home to me at one point. I was doing a more directed practice, paying attention to the breath. As I was paying attention, I started seeing there was this slipping away from the breath, slipping out into non-mindfulness for brief moments, and then I would come back and wake up and return to the breath. At some point I recognized that as the mind was letting go of the breath, I could see that. I could see the release from the object. There was a tendency at that point to say, "Oh, come back to the object. Come back to what I'm familiar with." I couldn't see what it was letting go into, but I could feel the letting go.

So instead of trying to hold my attention with the thing I was familiar with, I got curious about what that slip was. And mindfulness could be there with that. The experience in the release, the letting go of the object, was a real broadening and settling—it was like a whole different space, one I was very unfamiliar with. There was a little bit of fear that arose, and then that needed to be seen.

So these times when it feels like mindfulness is gaining momentum yet we see more slipping out—rather than bringing in effort, hover in that space for a time, a little while, and see what can be learned by just

receiving. Be willing to let the mindfulness slip out with curiosity, or almost with intention. It feels like intention to me. Maybe like dropping in the request: "Maybe the mind can see where it goes"—but then not trying to do it. That has been a way in my own practice that has extended the reach of mindfulness.

This brings me to the second area I was thinking of: places where an edge of trust often arises when we start to see unfamiliar terrain. Things we're not familiar with, things we've never experienced before, that we don't have words for and can't identify—we may find our mind wanting to figure them out, label them. We may start seeing strange imagery. I've seen sometimes the mind, in a space it doesn't quite understand, puts up an image. I remember one time seeing a field of wheat. "What's that about?" I reported this to Steve Armstrong, and he just said, "This is just the mind trying to understand the experience." It's the mind's way of perceiving an experience you're unfamiliar with.

So sometimes we may see this kind of imagery. You don't have to give meaning to it. The mind in perception just tries to make the best match. For me, looking out at that field of wheat was the best analogy for the state I was experiencing.

There are times with unfamiliar states when we might notice our mind trying to identify. We can just notice that—notice the searching for a label, the wanting to have some clarity, wanting to know, wanting to understand. As our practice gains momentum, as mindfulness and wisdom deepen, wisdom orients towards the deepening of practice, the deepening of seeing, and it will take us to places we don't know and cannot possibly know before we go.

So there's some trust there that we don't have to figure it out. It's an edge of trust—that it's okay if I don't understand this. What does it feel like? What's the experience? And what's the relationship?

Wanting to figure it out. Uncomfortable. Often the experience of unfamiliar experience is really uncomfortable. Notice the uncomfortableness—that's the relationship.

This is the simplicity of the practice: just meeting what's here and recognizing these edges of trust where our minds start to go, "No, I want to understand." If that's what's happening for you, simply notice that relationship, receive this.

Sometimes as mindfulness gains momentum, it does take us to these spaces of unfamiliar experience or more subtle experience. And we may kind of almost subconsciously use that as a signpost: "Oh, this is good practice. This means it's getting better," or something. And I'll just say that, kind of to my surprise, another experience that can happen, another way the deepening of mindfulness can be experienced—the momentum of mindfulness and wisdom—is that things feel really ordinary. Just ordinary. Ordinary perception.

And that can be an edge of trust too. We don't believe it could possibly be right. Surely I should be seeing something more extraordinary.

At one point I was noticing this at a three-month retreat, and I was reporting to Joseph and talking about noticing this ordinariness. At that point it was kind of like, "Wow, this is amazing. It's just ordinary, and it's so clear. I can live life like this." So I was getting a little excited. It's extraordinary that it's ordinary.

I went and reported this to Joseph, and he smiled. And he said, "Yeah, it can feel extraordinary. And then it just feels really ordinary."

To me, that was pointing to the attachment, the sense that the extraordinary is what deepening practice is. And he said, "Yeah, and it can just be really ordinary."

Everything is practice. Everything. Everything.

What's the experience?

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