Supports for Continuity

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 47:13

I will start this morning settling in with the sitting, and I will offer some reminders about this method of practice that we're offering.

Our basic exploration is recognizing that we're aware. This capacity to recognize that we're aware and to be curious about our experience as experience is supported by relaxation. Especially at the beginning of a retreat, it can be helpful to consciously connect with a relaxation of body, a relaxation of mind. It takes some time to allow for relaxation, and so we'll do this in a kind of systematic way again today.

Opening to the sensations of your head and face, see if there can be a softening. The face in particular has a very direct connection to the mind. If there's tension in the mind, it can be expressed in tension in the face. Relaxing tension in the muscles of the face can allow for a natural softening in the mind. Soften the muscles around the eyes, the mouth, the jaw. Allow for a relaxation of the neck and shoulders. A softening of the arms and hands. Maybe there can be a relaxation of the chest and upper back, all of those muscles around the rib cage. Perhaps there can be a relaxation, a letting go of tension across the stomach and abdomen, in the middle and lower back. Relaxing in the hips, maybe inside the hip socket. Maybe there can be a softening of the legs and the feet.

I also find it helpful to explore the possibility of relaxing inside the body. Perhaps there can be a softening inside the throat. A softening, a relaxation of the heart, the area around the heart. Maybe the stomach and the intestines can relax, all those organs inside the body. This area too is very connected to the mind, and so a relaxation of this inner landscape, this visceral area of the body, can support a softening in the mind, a relaxation of tension in the mind. Maybe too there can be an invitation for the mind to relax. As my colleague Gil Fronsdal suggests, as if the brain were a muscle, maybe the brain can relax.

Having explored a relaxation of body, of what might be possible to consciously release, I sometimes find it useful to just drop in again an invitation for there to be relaxation. May the body relax. And then just see how the mind and body respond to that invitation. Not trying to do anything, just seeing what happens as you drop in that invitation. May the body relax. I sometimes find with that kind of invitation some tension releases that I didn't even know was held until it has released. May the body relax. May the mind relax.

We've been connecting with awareness through this process of relaxation, being aware of various areas of tension and release. And now, allowing for a connection with the recognition: Are you aware? This is simple. Don't look too hard for it. In fact, looking for it will probably make it harder to recognize.

Just aware. Just knowing.

And yet often, especially at the beginning, it's easier to recognize awareness when we notice that we are aware of something. This can also be a doorway. So what is awareness aware of? What is being received?

There's no need to choose something to pay attention to. There will be something awareness is already receiving. What is obvious? What is easy to know? It may be the breath or body sensations, hearing—whatever is being received.

Exploring the possibility of allowing. It's just physical or mental phenomena happening in this human body. We are exploring this human experience, getting to know it like a naturalist in nature. What's showing up? It may be anything in our body, mental and physical processes. It could be thoughts or emotions.

Settling back, maybe with the feeling of experience coming to you. Sometimes it can feel that way. Sometimes it can feel like awareness is following the attention, kind of moving where the attention is. It's just a different experience that can happen. There's not a right way. It's noticing how awareness is receiving.

And recognizing that with this shifting of the attention, it's not a problem that the attention shifts. It may at times settle with one experience for a while, and at times it may move more quickly. We don't have to know all the details of what the awareness is landing with. Whatever is obvious is enough.

Sometimes I have the feeling of just resting and receiving. I remind myself: let awareness do its job. I don't have to do that. Awareness will be aware. That's its function.

Are you aware? What is obvious? What is awareness already receiving?

If you notice that the attention gravitates to a familiar meditation experience like the breath, that's fine. Just noticing the difference between when that happens naturally—it can feel very effortless—and when it feels like we start to do that attending. Notice the difference there between receiving the experience and directing the attention to it. If you notice a directing of the attention, there is likely some tension with that. So perhaps remembering relaxation. Relaxing, receiving.

And awareness will get caught, will lose mindfulness, will lose awareness, be lost in thinking or lost in a state. At some point, mindfulness will return. In that return, some curiosity about the experience of becoming aware again. It's a great moment to begin to get really familiar with what it's like to be aware.

That awareness will be aware of something, likely something connected with where the wandering went. We don't need to judge that. It's conditions. It's the conditioned nature of the mind.

And so opening to what's here now, in this moment. It's kind of like the wandering creates a landscape in the mind, a new world that we haven't been clearly aware of because the mindfulness was lost. But in the return of mindfulness, we're often waking up into that landscape.

So what's the landscape like? We're a naturalist on a new planet. What planet are we on?

This is recognizing the effect. This is seeing the conditioning, how the mind has been conditioned. It's not a mistake. It's not a problem. It can be received. It is being received in awareness. Are you aware? What is obvious? What's easy? What is awareness already aware of?

And from time to time, we check the relationship. How are we with what is happening? What's the attitude, as Sayadaw would say? Do you want something to happen? Want something to stop happening? Is there confusion? Or maybe there's an ease, an okayness, a balance of mind.

Checking the attitude can be done with a simple question: How am I with what's happening? Again, it's an invitation. It's not that we're looking for something specific. It's an invitation for an attitude to show up, to be more clearly recognized. Sometimes we don't necessarily recognize an attitude, and that's okay. Just continue noticing what's obvious.

Often I find that in asking a question like that, sometimes an answer appears as a word in the mind or a sentence. But more often it actually appears through a shift in the experience, a recognition of, "Oh, this is arising also. This is also here, and it hadn't been clearly seen." Maybe there's a recognition of some tension around a pushing away. "Oh, there's aversion." It may not be expressed in words in the mind. So in checking the attitude, simply notice the experience. We drop in that invitation and keep noticing what's here, what's obvious.

Fundamentally, this practice is extremely simple. Very little to do. Just a light touch of effort to connect—aware of what? Aware of what?

Relaxation, as I've said several times, is so helpful. It's a helpful condition that supports our capacity to recognize that we're aware, to have this receptive aspect, this receptive awareness. At the beginning, it is helpful to consciously relax. And as we continue in this exploration of recognizing awareness and allowing, receiving what's here, what I find is that connecting with that receptivity quite naturally brings relaxation into the experience.

So it goes both ways. The relaxation supports the receptivity, and the receptivity supports a relaxation. You may find that starting with just what's here and noticing, "Oh, there's some tension," quite naturally that tension releases.

I mentioned in the meditation about when the mind wanders—we wake up at some point, and noticing the return of mindfulness, that moment when we become aware again, how important that moment is to begin to see, to recognize the experience of awareness, what it feels like to be aware.

If we're not judging ourselves for having gotten lost, it's much easier to notice that return of mindfulness. At one point, I began to get really curious about that experience of the return. And just that curiosity really helped to release the judgment around the fact that the mind wandered, because if in a 45-minute sitting

the mind wandered a hundred times, that was a hundred opportunities to see awareness returning and to get familiar with that experience—what it's like to be aware.

The recognition, getting familiar with what it's like to be aware, will be a support for the continuing of the awareness.

And in the waking up after the mind has wandered, as I mentioned, it's like when the mind wanders it can wander off into some thought or fantasy or memory of something we were doing yesterday or an experience last week when we were not here. It can be wandering off into something, and the constructing power of the mind is so powerful. So when we wake up, we often get to see what has been constructed while the mind was wandering. We're waking up into something that has been shaped by the conditioned nature of our minds. The mind wandered—perhaps it heard a sound, and that sound reminded us of something, and that reminding allowed a memory to arise, but we got lost somewhere in that process instead of being aware of it.

And so when mindfulness returns, we can see what had been shaped. I often use this analogy of the mind creating a planet, just a whole world while it's wandering. And our exploration when mindfulness returns is to be curious: What planet am I on now? Is it planet confusion? Planet fun? Planet frustration? And then just feeling that. What's that like? Can that be received? Can that be allowed?

Noticing the attitude is a really useful practice after returning from wandering. We often have not only a relationship to the fact of the wandering itself, but we may have relationships to what it wandered into. A feeling like "that was a waste of time." Okay, that's what's arising now—that attitude.

Sometimes when the mind wanders—and I've seen this happen more often than I would have expected when I first started getting curious about what had been shaped by the mind wandering and began to lose the judgment about it—sometimes when the mind wanders, it wanders into calm. It wanders into ease. For me it was kind of like the mind saying, "Hey, you're working too hard. Let me show you how to relax." And it would get lost in that relaxing, and then there would be a coming back into awareness and being curious: Oh, what planet was I on? I was on planet calm. Okay, that's what's here now.

If we're judging ourselves for the wandering itself, that judgment will probably obliterate the calm. So just really be curious about what's here. What's here in each moment.

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