Continuity

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 53:29

Are you aware? What's obvious? What's easy? What is already being received?

It doesn't matter what the experience is. We can be aware with any experience. We can be aware when the attention rests with one experience for a while, or when it's shifting from experience to experience. Every experience offers an opportunity to learn curiosity about experience as experience.

If it feels like there's a struggle, any tension about connecting with experience, notice the relationship. Check the attitude. Be curious about what perspective is here. If checking the attitude, noticing the relationship, allows something new to be seen—something that had been hidden—then that too is just another experience, another happening.

Notice the return of awareness. If the mind has wandered and woken up again, recognize that re-arising of awareness. Aware again.

Quite often the mind wanders, gets hooked, and part of that being hooked and losing mindfulness is often connected to the process of thinking. And thinking itself is not inherently an experience that we can't be mindful of, like any other experience. It's just an arising phenomenon that awareness can know, can connect with. You can be curious about the experience of thoughts, of thinking. A simple recognition: thinking is happening.

Sometimes the recognition might be a little more specific—the kind of thinking that's happening. But we don't have to try to do this or label this. Mind can just open to the recognition that thinking is happening. Often Sayadaw will say, "Can you know a thought is a thought? Can you know a thought is just a thought?"

Sometimes thoughts are pretty potent. They have a pull. There's strong content that's attaching or interesting the mind—the content of the thought. And if the content is compelling, it can be really useful to recognize that this content, the contour of the nature of the thought, is shaping our experience. Thoughts about a conversation with a friend—that content will have an effect, likely an effect on us, conditioning emotions, conditioning body sensations. And so, some curiosity: How is this thought affecting the body and mind?

Sometimes the content is less strong, not particularly compelling. We can have some curiosity about how we know we are thinking. How is the thought appearing? Is it as if we're speaking to ourselves? As if someone else is speaking to us? Images? Sometimes even a felt sense in the body, a kinesthetic experience. We can recognize how thoughts are happening, how they are experienced.

We can also be curious—and this is very interesting with thoughts that are more random or drifty or daydreamy—to be curious about the quality of the mind that is having those thoughts. It can be spacious, easeful, calm. And often we kind of just lose awareness, drifting off into those states, the quality of the mind. Yet we can be clearly aware of the calm, the ease, the spaciousness.

Not looking for any particular experience, not trying to create a special state. Whatever is present can be received, is being received. The practice is so simple. Are you aware? What is awareness receiving?

Sometimes in exploring being aware with thinking, people describe that when they notice a thought, the thought goes away, and so they've been confused about how they can actually know thinking while it's happening. What I would say is that that kind of observation—it's more about how the mind is looking at the experience. If we're directing or aiming to look at a thought, and the practice of noting is doing that, like naming "thinking" or "planning" or "remembering," it's a directing, it's an aiming, often. And that very activity of aiming uses the same energy in the mind that thinking uses. And so it takes the energy out of the thought. That way of observing will naturally cause the thought to tend to disappear. The very word in Pali for that aiming or directing of the attention is *vitakka*.

It's also translated as thought or thinking. So that energy of aiming will tend to create the conditions for a thought to go away. This can be very useful. This is partly how the mind can settle with a more concentration practice.

And yet we are also interested, especially in this style of practice, in learning how to be aware with all experience. The kind of awareness that can know thinking while it's happening is receptive. A receiving quality can simply know what's arising in that awareness, including thought, and be aware in the recognition of that arising—how it's affecting other experience.

So there's this curiosity about being aware with thinking and how thinking, especially the content, has a very potent conditioning power in the mind. We become curious not so much about what the content is, although that can be apparent as we become aware with thinking, but about how that content is affecting emotions, affecting the body. This is seeing the conditioning power, the shaping power of thoughts—the shaping power of mental formations.

Mental formations are a functioning of mind that shapes all of experience. They shape how our body is, the quality of the feeling tone, what we're perceiving. They shape other mental formations, so the content of a thought can shape an emotion. And they can also shape what we tend to notice, where the attention goes, what consciousness meets. So it's a very powerful shaping quality, and this is useful to notice.

Noticing the conditioned nature of experience, we begin to recognize and understand what qualities of heart and mind shape unhelpful suffering, unskillful experience, unwholesome qualities of mind—and what shapes the wholesome. Quite naturally there will be a weakening of the unwholesome and a strengthening of the wholesome in the seeing of these processes, in the seeing of this conditioned nature.

When content is less strong, we can be curious about the process of how thinking is happening. A certain level or layer of thoughts often feels as if we're speaking to ourselves, talking to ourselves. Sometimes we can notice it's like somebody else's voice, or like a radio playing—we're hearing somebody else speaking to us. It might be images. Thoughts can be experienced through any sense modality. Often, I think, it is through sound and sight, as if we are seeing or hearing our thoughts. Now, it's not really that seeing and hearing are happening, but they're expressing themselves in that way.

We can notice this—the process of how thinking is happening. It can also be as if we're smelling something. This for me is much rarer, but I have experienced it: there's a smell, and it's like I'm actually smelling something, and then I realize, no, that's a thought. Physically too—sometimes a thought can be experienced as if we're doing something. This was how I practiced my dances when I was a dancer: thinking the feeling. Any sense modality, we can be curious about how thoughts are arising. And sometimes that's what's obvious.

Again, this isn't something to try to do. This is more of a naming of things that can be noticed. I'll probably say this multiple times. Certainly Sayadaw said it to me several times, because I would hear what he talked about and then go try to do it. I'd come back and report either my struggle or my success, and he would say, "Are you trying to do that?" And I would say, "Yeah, I thought that's what you suggested." And he'd say, "Nothing I say is anything for you to do. It's simply a description of things that can be noticed."

It's useful to describe or to hear different things that can be seen, because sometimes the descriptions will help us recognize: oh, that's actually what is already being noticed, but it hadn't been clearly recognized until it was named. So this description around noticing the way thinking is happening—you don't have to try to do this. Just continue simple, simple practice. What's arising? What are you noticing? What's naturally being noticed? This information, this sharing, is a condition that may allow you to recognize something different in your experience.

Another piece around thinking: often, especially as the practice begins to settle, as the mind begins to settle, it's not discursive thinking that's happening but rather daydreamy images, hypnagogic states—that quality of just random, seemingly random thoughts coming through about people we don't know, things happening we don't particularly care about. Just imagery, or words even, kind of funny random words appearing in the mind. When that kind of thinking is happening—

there's usually a quality to the mind that's pretty relaxed, pretty spacious. And so that can be recognized. Sometimes we get lost in the relaxed, spacious quality of mind. It's like those hypnagogic images are almost a sign of the mindfulness weakening a little bit, because the mind is getting caught in the state itself.

So the recognition of the quality of the mind can brighten the mindfulness. If you kind of wake up noticing those hypnagogic images, if you're waking up into those, notice the quality of the mind that's already happening. It's just available. It's available to be recognized. And again, not something to do—it's

something that can be seen, something that can be recognized.

A couple of you have asked about reading. There are some books by Sayadaw U Tejaniya in the library. There are a limited number of those books, and so I'd like to encourage you not to keep them in your room for the retreat, but to share them with each other. We are going to order a couple more copies so that they're available.

I would also encourage, if you do reading, to do it sparingly. Maybe just a paragraph. And while you're doing that, see if you can notice—these are thoughts, this is content that you are taking in. This is a way of exploring a relationship to content. Read a sentence. How does that content affect your experience? Does it brighten the mind? Does it allow you to recognize the awareness? Reading a few sentences and noticing how it affects you.

I recently published a book that we're going to have about four or five copies available in the library as well. And I will give you a copy when you go. I don't want you just reading the books during the retreat. They'll be available in the library—you can, again, sparingly read. And you don't even have to read. I feel like we are offering you plenty. But some people tend to learn with that modality, so it's available if you wish. But do keep in mind that there are a limited number of those books, so please share.

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