Not Knowing

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 43:47

Simply continue. Aware. Aware with the experience that is already happening.

Sometimes as the mindfulness gets a little more continuous, there are times when we know that we're aware, and yet we don't know what awareness is aware of. It can feel like there is the awareness and there is the recognition that there is hearing and body sensations, but that doesn't seem to be what the awareness is really connecting with.

In that experience of aware and not sure what awareness is really connecting with or receiving, we can simply know that. Aware. Don't know what the object is. Just resting and receiving that.

This helps us also to really clearly recognize that we're aware. We begin to trust that. We know we're aware. And yet the experience, whatever it is, may be unfamiliar. It may be a subtle kind of state that we don't have a name for. We don't recognize it. But we can know that we're aware. Simple. Trusting that. Trusting awareness and wisdom.

Some curiosity arises: what's it like? What's the experience like to not know? We often have some relationship to that. Most of us have a long history of being encouraged to be clear, to know. And it feels uncomfortable to not know. It might feel confusing or vulnerable. It might create some anxiety.

So we need to notice the relationship. We might start grasping for something clear, searching to make things more familiar. And the practice is simple. We notice that we're aware. Awareness will naturally be receiving something. We don't always know what it is, and we can know that.

Sometimes it's clear. Sometimes we do know what it is. We can know that. Sometimes it's something pleasant. Sometimes unpleasant. We can know that. Just experience arising in this human body and mind. Being seen, recognized.

We're curious about its nature. We're curious about where we tend to grasp, to hold, and feel the suffering of that. In feeling that with awareness and wisdom, it begins to release. We notice that.

What's actually happening in this moment? Body sensation arising and being known. Mind states arising and being known. Awareness recognized. Simple.

And sometimes our minds complicate things, trying to search, look, figure out. That too is just an arising and can be known. Simple. Complication is happening.

Just another experience, another object. What's this?

We can be drawn to what's familiar. The way our minds work, our habits, our conditioning shapes what we tend to receive, what we tend to notice. And often that orients to what is familiar—what we already know, what we're already used to noticing and recognizing.

Sometimes in our practice, that recognition of what we're familiar with begins to help us see more clearly what we are familiar with, to see more texture. The direct experience of what we're familiar with makes it seem more lively, more here. Some of you have used the words "raw experience" in your descriptions. Even as we orient to what's familiar, we begin to see more fineness, more subtlety.

And yet sometimes that way of meeting experience becomes like a habit in itself—that sense of the clarity of experience, the clarity of knowing, the clarity of seeing more closely, more detail. This is one way the practice helps us to see more clearly what's happening. We can see into how those experiences come into being and how they fall apart. That's one way that mindfulness and wisdom are curious about experience.

Yet also, as mindfulness gets stronger, as mindfulness and wisdom gain momentum and have more continuity, it feels like wisdom starts to get interested in things that we have no clue about—things we are not at all familiar with. Wisdom begins to orient towards noticing the unfamiliar. This kind of exploration that wisdom begins to do on its own is not something we can really do, because we can't look for what we don't know.

When wisdom begins to be curious about what's unfamiliar, it can feel uncomfortable because we're so used to knowing. We want to know. We have that strong conditioning. When we don't know what's happening, we have a strong conditioning to try to figure out what's happening—a searching, a trying to land, a trying to name, identify, to recognize. All of that is conditioned. And the practice actually deepens through noticing that relationship: noticing the wanting to land, noticing the searching, noticing the idea that it's not okay to not know, noticing the doubt.

So we recognize those as processes of mind, and begin, over time, to get more comfortable, more okay with the fact that there are times we just don't know what's happening. We can be aware, we can know that we're aware, and not know what awareness is receiving.

I helped myself get more comfortable with this place of not knowing by reminding myself that, largely by its nature, insight—understanding into the nature of experience, a deepening of insight—we can't know what that will be. The Buddha speaks of freedom, the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion. Do I have some flavor or taste of what that might be like? I don't know. That ultimate release, the place the Buddha is said to be living in—we can't really know.

When the mind releases, that's another place of the unknown. When the mind lets go, sometimes that experience of letting go can bring a little bit of uncertainty or fear. Where is it going? We can't know. And so the curiosity turns toward what's in the way: all those ideas about needing to know, searching for something, needing to have clarity about what's happening.

As we see those as complications, as we see those as habits, as patterns of mind, their weakening supports the conditions for the mind to simply open to this. The very act of looking, trying to find—all of those movements of mind, the doubt, the trying to land, the searching for something, the trying to find clarity—will tend to obscure what's unfamiliar.

So we have to trust. Trust wisdom. Trust awareness. It's okay to not know.

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