

Awareness and Wisdom

Instructions for Receptive Awareness Practice

Transcribed and edited from a July 2015 residential retreat with Andrea Fella

Day 1	2
Initial Instructions for Receptive Awareness Practice	2
<i>Relaxation</i>	3
<i>Wise Effort, Wise Mindfulness and Wise Concentration</i>	4
<i>Checking the Attitude</i>	8
<i>The Wandering Mind</i>	11
<i>Walking Meditation</i>	12
Guided Meditation	14
Evening Reflection: Allowing and Love	16
Day 2	18
Sleepiness, Restlessness and Thinking	18
<i>Guided Meditation: Simple</i>	23
Evening Reflection: Trust	24
Day 3	26
Supports for Continuity: A guided meditation	26
<i>Further Reflections on Continuity</i>	27
Evening Reflection: Appreciating the Wholesome	29
Day 4	31
Body and Mind: Conditionality	31
<i>Intention and Motivation</i>	33
Evening Reflection: Knowing Beautiful Qualities	35
Day 5	37
Awareness of Awareness (from a guided meditation)	37
Evening Reflection: Accepting what is offered	38
Day 6	40
Recognizing Wisdom at Work	40
Evening Reflection: Nothing to Do or Undo	42
Day 7	44
What Kind of Effort is Helpful	44
Evening Reflection: Simple Awareness Receives Complex Experience	45
Day 8	48
What is the Nature of...	48
Observing Change	49
<i>Noticing when change stops</i>	51
Evening Reflection: No Part Left Out	51
Day 9	53
Rhythms of Practice	53
<i>Evolving Trust in Practice</i>	55
Evening Reflection: When we Stop Resisting the Truth the Mind can Relax	56

Day 1

Initial Instructions for Receptive Awareness Practice

I'd like to offer some key points for how to practice here. But first I'd like to say a little bit about why we practice. We each have our own reasons why we practice. It often has something to do with wanting to understand why we struggle, why we suffer. This is the purpose of our practice: to understand and learn about our how our minds participate in the ways that we struggle. We don't necessarily try to get rid of things that we don't like, but as we learn about our how our minds work, wisdom grows.

Wisdom helps us to understand what's going on in our minds, and wisdom is actually what does the work of letting go, and so the purpose of our practice is the learning, the cultivation of understanding that leads to wisdom. Wisdom is what helps our mind refrain from participating in its usual habits and patterns, of fear, anxiety, confusion, greed, boredom, and anxiety: the many different ways we react to experience. Wisdom helps our minds to reorient from automatically heading in towards reactivity and points us in a completely different direction: a direction based in love, in compassion, in generosity, in wisdom and balance of mind. So instead of our minds' acting in the service of creating greed, aversion, and delusion, instead, through the support of wisdom, our minds begin creating peace, and ease, and compassion. In this style of practice that I'll be sharing with you, the emphasis is about getting familiar with our minds: Getting familiar with the way our minds move into these reactive patterns, and getting familiar with the ways in which our mind can participate in the creation of ease and peace instead of reactivity. The emphasis of this practice is learning about the mind, because this where the stress happens, this is where the suffering happens, and this is where the orientation towards happiness and ease happens.

The first verses of the Dhammapada point to why the emphasis on exploring the mind is so important:

*All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind.
Speak, or act with a corrupted mind, and suffering follows
as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.*

*All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind, and happiness follows
like a never-departing shadow.*

As we explore the mind, we will start to recognize our reactive mind states: '*Oh, this is greed, or This is confusion, or This is anger, or This is anxiety.*' Yet, we may not be able to say, '*That's not so helpful, let me stop doing that.*' So much of our work lies in *understanding* the reactive states. Opening to them, witnessing them, watching them and how they work. Through that practice, wisdom grows, and wisdom begins to change the direction of the mind.

In this practice, we will be opening to all aspects of our physical and mental experience. The primary practice is a receptive awareness, of settling back and opening to what the attention is already aware of. Rather than choosing where to put the attention, we notice where the attention already is.

In a practice that uses directed attention, we consciously choose where to place the attention, for example, to attend to the breath, or hearing, or another specific experience. Receptive attention is more about settling back, and noticing what attention is already noticing. In both styles of practice, the factor of attention is working, it's just a matter of whether we are involved in actively choosing where that attention is. Exploring receptive attention we learn about our minds, because as we settle back and receive what attention is already noticing, we can learn something about how the conditioning of mind tends to direct the attention.

We'll also explore noticing our relationship to experience, what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls the attitude of mind..

Relaxation

For our practice it is really helpful to be grounded in relaxation. Relaxation supports opening to and allowing receptive awareness. Relaxation of body supports relaxation of mind, and the relaxed mind can very naturally receive experience.

It is helpful, particularly in the beginning of the retreat, to start some of your sittings with conscious relaxation: relaxing the tension in the body, and relaxing tension in the mind. Then once that relaxation is available, becoming aware of what the mind is already noticing.

As the retreat goes on, rather than necessarily consciously relaxing tension, it might be more helpful to recognize: *There's tension in the body.* Then we see what happens as we allow the awareness, the mindfulness to meet the tension. As the practice settles in, sometimes we find that

as we are aware of tension, very naturally, the mind and body will simply relax, and we don't have consciously relax.

Wise Effort, Wise Mindfulness and Wise Concentration

I'd like to explore three aspects of practice: Wise Effort, Wise Mindfulness, and Wise Concentration, and how they work in this practice. If you are used to a more focused practice, these three aspects might work a bit differently than you are used to.

First, **mindfulness**. The practice we are exploring is primarily *receptive*. So if you're used to directing the attention as a way to cultivate the stability of awareness, such as attending to a primary experience like the breath, and bringing the attention back to the breath if the mind wanders, this practice may feel a little bit unsettled at first, because we will **not** be choosing to direct the attention. Instead, we will choose to recognize awareness.

Are you aware? Right now, are you aware? Do you know that you're aware? Probably the answer is yes. You may not be clear about **how** you actually know you are aware, or what the experience of awareness itself is, but often there can be a simple recognition, *Yes, I know I'm aware*. To start with, that's enough. Just know that you're aware.

Over the course of the retreat, we're going to be coming back to this a lot. As we begin to recognize awareness itself, we will know, *Awareness is here right now*. As we begin to recognize the experience of awareness itself, it becomes a kind of touchstone. It does not matter so much what attention is paying attention to. What matters is that we are aware, that we know we're aware, and there's this cultivation of this stability of the awareness itself. This is a key for the practice, to regularly check: *Am I aware?*

You don't have try to figure out how you know that you are aware, or what it means to be aware. Just recognize, *I know that I'm aware*. Over time, that experience becomes clear. It starts to become more available, more tangible, in a way. We begin to clearly recognize, *this is awareness*. Once we clearly know that we're aware, we open to noticing what awareness is aware of. Awareness is always aware of something, which we can call an object, or simply an experience.. Awareness and an object happen together. We won't have one without the other. Sometimes the object or experience is diffuse, or not so clear. But that is simply a diffuse experience; it does not mean there is no experience happening. So there is an object, and the awareness of it.

Are you aware? And what are you aware of? The range of possible experience is the entirety of our mind/body processes. The range of experience comes through the six sense doors: we experience sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and anything happening in the mind: feelings, thoughts, emotions, mind states, moods. Everything ranging from boredom and confusion to bliss, concentration, balance of mind. We can also notice thoughts and images.

Recognizing that we are aware, and knowing what we are aware of is the mindfulness aspect of this practice. We notice both the objects of experience and the awareness itself. In a little while, I'll talk about noticing the relationship to experience; the attitude in the mind, noticing *how* we are aware.

Now let's explore **effort**. How we make effort, how we stay with experience is an important aspect of practice, because so often greed or aversion creeps into the way that we make effort. It's helpful to keep track of how we're making effort, and explore making effort in a very light, relaxed way.

Right now, do you notice the experience of your hands? Can you notice that? How about the sensations of your feet? Or your legs, as they're touching the floor. And the sensation of your lips, touching together. How hard is it to know those experiences as I name them? Usually, it's not that hard: notice your hands right now. There! Your attention is right there! It doesn't take a lot of effort to just be aware for a moment. What *is* more difficult, is to sustain awareness over time, to cultivate a continuity of awareness. Trying to sustain awareness is where we often tighten, or try to gear up our effort.

I used to sit down, and I'd think, *All right, I'm going to do this, 45 minutes!* It was like I was trying to gather all of my energy to stay present for 45 minutes right at the start of the sitting. Instead of gearing up the effort, try a very gentle persistent effort. It doesn't take that much effort to be present for a moment. And then, do it again. Just enough effort for a moment, and then another moment, and then again! and again! and again! and again!

It doesn't take a heavy effort to cultivate continuous mindfulness. What often happens is that the mind thinks, *I have to do this again, and again, and again.* Even just thinking about it, our minds can get exhausted. That is just our minds creating a narrative that it's going to be exhausting! Actually, we need just a very gentle, persistent, light touch of effort. We do need some level of energy to make effort, but we all have that level of energy right now. There's the energy of life.

Here it is. If we are awake and sitting up, there's enough energy to be present for a moment, and enough to do it again, and again and again. And that kind of effort, that light touch of effort, generates energy, generates Dharma energy. We think that making effort uses up energy, and it does, if we do it in a habitual way. But this light touch of effort, rather than using up energy, actually builds the momentum, builds the energy.

So, part of our practice is how we engage with this light touch of reminding ourselves to be aware. The very first instructions Sayadaw U Tejaniya gave to me was, "The only work you give your mind, is to remind yourself to be aware." *Am I aware? Am I aware?* Moment after moment. That's our work. And the tuning of the effort has to do with how frequently we remind ourselves to be aware.

I like to use an analogy of riding a scooter, the little kick-scooters, those scooter that kids ride, the ones you have to tap your foot on the ground to get some momentum going. To start riding a scooter from a stand-still, you have to put your foot on the ground and TAP. Tap, tap, tap. You could put your foot on the ground and push really hard, but that does not create a very stable movement. That really hard push might give you a wobbly ride. But with a little gentle tap, tap, tap, you can balance and get the momentum going. After a while you get a sense of the feeling of the momentum, and you can stop tapping so much. You can ride for a while. When you start to notice the scooter get a little wobbly, you put your foot down and tap a few more times.

The effort in our mindfulness practice is very much like that. We remind ourselves to be aware - at the beginning, we remind ourselves frequently. It can happen through conscious questions, such as: "*Aware?! What's obvious?*" Actually using thoughts in the mind to help you stay present. *Am I aware?*, or just *Aware? Aware of what?* Those light questions in the mind can help you make that light touch of effort.

But as the time goes on, you can let the questions go, and just recognize that you are aware and what you are aware of. You can know that you are aware, with a little bit of an intention to connect with experience.

At the beginning we have to remind ourselves frequently, but over time we gain familiarity with what it feels like to have momentum of awareness. At times we can "coast," not needing to make a lot of active effort. We become familiar with that feeling. It's like the momentum of the scooter, and know when it's time to just gently reconnect, to remind again.

So the effort in the practice has to do with this light touch moment after moment; learning how often to make that light touch, and when we can back off from it.

In this exploration, you will probably either be reminding yourself too much, or not enough. It's a learning process. It's a trial and error process. We learn how much to remind ourselves given the conditions of our minds, and those conditions are constantly changing. Because if you get into a good rhythm with the effort, then the momentum builds, and you don't need to remind yourself as much. Or sometimes you coast for a long time, and actually you go coasting out into space and lose touch. So we have to tune the effort to the conditions.

The combination of **mindfulness** and **effort**: the gentle persistence of the mindful attention, those two together create **concentration**.

Many of us are familiar with the type concentration that happens when we stay with a single experience, such as the breath. One pointed concentration practice creates a lot of stillness in the mind. It stabilizes both the awareness and the experience. This kind of practice tends to create the experience of stillness.

With the style of practice that we're orienting towards here - and this is not a judgment on any other styles of practice, this is just a style of practice that I've found to be incredibly useful - In this style of practice, rather than allowing the attention to stabilize on one experience, where things become more and more still, instead we open to a changing show of experience.

In receptive awareness practice, the awareness itself becomes stable, yet what we are noticing can be quite dynamic. If you're unfamiliar with receptive awareness practice, or if you're more familiar with a concentration style of practice where things get still, this can be a little unsettling. It can feel like, *"This can't possibly be meditation, because the mind is EVERYWHERE! I'm noticing a sight, I'm noticing a body sensation, I'm noticing an emotion, I'm noticing another body sensation, Oh there's a breath, and then, and then there's another sound, and it's like, The mind's ALL OVER THE PLACE! How can this possibly be right?!"*

We are cultivating the stability of the awareness in the practice, rather than the stability of objects. This stability of awareness *is* a form of concentration. It is called *khanika samadhi* in the Pali, which means: moment to moment concentration . That stable awareness can meet a changing flow of experience. Often when we open to a changing flow of experience, there will

be something in that flow that the mind gets hooked by, the sound of a motorcycle, for instance. The mind can latch onto it and start thinking: *That motorcycle's going down to the beach. I wish I could be going down to the beach...* and then we're off at the beach in our thoughts.

So we can get caught by any experience in the changing flow, and this is part of the learning process. We start to learn how to stay present in that flow, without having the mind get hooked by an experience.

Just notice: *Sound. Pressure. Breath. Thought. Confusion. Pressure. Over and over. What am I aware of? Aware. Of what?* Learning to maintain the awareness in the flow of experience, that's the basic tool of the practice. The mind *will* wander, it will get hooked! We need to have patience with the process, and recognize that this is how we learn. We are learning about our minds here. Sometimes I call this practice: Your Mind, 101.

Because we do not restrict or narrow down the field of attention—from the beginning of this practice we open to the whole range of our experience—we will tend to see where our minds get hooked. We will see that certain sounds or smells or sights tend to take us out into aversion, or greed. We may also notice certain thoughts and emotions tend to hook us: habits and patterns of mind. When we notice how the mind is getting hooked by something, we can recognize: *this is part of the practice. There is a smell and I don't like it.* This is where noticing the **attitude** comes in. So we recognize, as we're exploring this flow of experience, what our relationship to the experience is.

Checking the Attitude

It's helpful to check the attitude from time to time. You can use the question: *What's my attitude, what's my relationship to the experience?* If you're in the flow of being aware of a changing field of experience, you don't have to check your attitude for every single object that's happening. Just from time to time, step back and check in, maybe about every 5 minutes or so. *What's the relationship to noticing all of this stuff happening?* You might check in and recognize, *It feels very confusing to be noticing all of this flow.* So confusion simply becomes part of what we notice.

As we check the attitude, open up to the relationship to experience, it will have one of four basic flavors. There's always some kind of a relationship to experience, whether we can recognize it or not.

The attitude might have the flavor of the **greed**: of wanting something, of wanting to hold on to something, leaning into something. It could have the flavor of **aversion**: of wanting to get rid of something, to fix it, to change it, to make it go away. It could have the flavor of **delusion**: which might be confusion, boredom, disconnection, or some belief or view about the experience. The fourth basic flavor of attitude is **balance of mind** – being okay with what is happening. Calm. Ease.

So checking in from time to time:.. *What's the attitude? What's my relationship to experience?* Asking this question, we are not trying to figure out what the attitude is, or think about it. We simply ask the question, and see if anything bubbles up. Using these questions is like noticing what happens when we drop a pebble into a still pool. When the pebble drops, we notice it creates ripples. Similarly, we can drop the question *What's the attitude?* into the mind, and see what happens.

As you check, you may or may not notice anything obvious. You may not notice anything in particular. If not, you don't have to go digging. Just step back and see, *Is there something here that I haven't been noticing?*

If you don't notice anything in particular at that point, just continue. *Aware? Of what? What's obvious?* Just continue with that.

Sometimes it will be blindingly obvious. You're aware of an experience and its so clear that you don't like it. That's aversion. If you clearly recognize an attitude, it simply becomes something else in the flow of the experience. For example: *pain is happening, and not liking is happening.*

As you notice the attitude, you might start to notice that it colors other things in the mind. You might recognize that with aversion in the mind, the mind starts orienting to look for other things it doesn't like. So we start to get curious, how does the attitude influence our experience?

When we check the attitude, we might or might not notice an attitude. It might be that the attitude is subtle, and just a little hint of greed or aversion that's not very obvious. Or it might be that the attitude is of balance of mind, of ease, of calm. At the beginning we may not be familiar with recognizing balance, calm, ease as an attitude of mind. If an attitude is not clear, you could check: Is this calm? Does the mind feel OK? Does it feel like "no problem"?

In this practice we're exploring how to observe from the perspective of "no problem". This is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls wise attitude, or right attitude. This is an attitude of mind that allows us to be at ease with whatever is happening.

Whatever happens, that too can be included. Surrender mind. Allowing mind. Yet, we're not going to be able to find our way to "no problem" mind by deciding, *I'd like this to be no problem*. We find our way to "no problem" mind by recognizing where the mind thinks there is a problem.

Getting familiar with the many ways that the mind is not content takes us a step in the direction of contentment. We can recognize, *there is pain and I don't like it*. When we actually recognize. *Not liking is happening*, we can be OK that not liking is happening! It's not a problem that not liking is happening. It's just not liking. Right there, that is wise attitude, not liking is not a problem. And so we begin to explore those relationships of struggle.

Sayadaw uses the term **wrong attitude** for relationships that are connected to greed, aversion and delusion. We get to know right attitude by getting familiar with wrong attitude. As wrong attitude becomes exposed, as we recognize, *not liking is happening right now*, that attitude shifts from being the way that we are observing, to just being another experience that can be known.

The attitude is like a colored lens that we're looking through. When we're looking through a colored lens, if we've got blue lenses on, we're seeing everything with a blue tint. At first we may be unaware that we're looking through blue glasses. But we can become aware that there is this blue relationship. When we become aware of that, it is like taking those glasses off, and looking *at* them, rather than *through* them. We can know the attitude with a mind that is more balanced or at ease.

We sometimes call these reactive states hindrances. They hinder our ability to really stay present in a balanced way. And yet when they're known, clearly recognized with mindfulness, they are no longer in the way. They are no longer hindering us. But they are actually become the ground, the compost out of which mindfulness grows.

The Wandering Mind

Another aspect of practice is how to work with the wandering mind: when the mind wanders off into thought. This will happen, and for those of you unfamiliar to this practice, it may feel like it happens more than in your usual practice.

So, patience with it. First check in, *Am I aware? Am I aware?* Sometimes when we when we start land in a flow of experience, of *body sensation, sight, sound, breath, thought, sound*, it can feels like the mind is wandering! If we're used of having the mind be still on one particular experience, it feels different and we might mistake it for wandering mind. But check the awareness. Are you aware of all of these different experiences?

But the mind will wander sometimes, and you lose awareness of the present moment. You will wake up into thought at some point. At that point, that moment when you recognize that your mind has been wandering, **right at that moment, you are mindful again.** That's a really important moment. Mindfulness is back already. Awareness has returned. Mindfulness has returned all by itself. You didn't have to do anything. Your mind was doing its own thing, wandering into the past or the future, and boom! Mindfulness is back. So the moment when you recognize that mindfulness is back is a key moment: we can start to become familiar with the possibility of a truly effortless mindfulness. It's in that moment, you didn't have to make any effort to be mindful, it just happened.

Get familiar with that moment! That moment that awareness returns is a great time to begin to get familiar with the experience of awareness itself. Because in that moment there can be a sense of the difference between the mind that is clearly present right now, aware right now, and the mind that was lost a few moments ago. In that moment you can have a better sense of what awareness actually is. Can you be curious about that moment of mindfulness returning? The curiosity about the moment that awareness returns can help us cut through the judging mind around mindfulness getting lost. If the mind gets lost 50 times during a sitting, that is 50 opportunities to get familiar with that effortless rearing of awareness.

So when mindfulness returns, first notice the awareness itself, and then see what is obvious; what is awareness aware of in that moment. It might be a thought, it might be an emotion, just notice what the awareness already knows.

If you feel like the thoughts are pulling you out of the present moment, then it can be useful to consciously choose to direct your attention. Pick some obvious experience in the present moment to attend to. It could just be an obvious body sensation. It might be the breath. But then you don't have to hold on to it for long. Just connect with it for a few moments, and then, as you start to notice other experiences coming into awareness, you can open to those.

Walking Meditation

First a recap the basic instructions. *Am I aware? What's obvious?* From time to time, check your attitude. Check your relationship. The work is in the gentle persistent reminding yourself to be aware. Those are the instructions for sitting meditation.

The instructions for walking practice are exactly the same. The instructions for kitchen practice are the same. The instructions for practice when you're brushing your teeth, lying down, and going to bed are the same. These practices really help us to learn and to understand how to carry this awareness just into our lives. Into the world. The instructions going home? The same. Always the same practice, throughout the day. *Am I aware? What am I aware of?* Light touch of effort.

This practice is no difference on or off the cushion. No change to the instructions. And you will be surprised, perhaps, some of you, at just how much you can see just using this very simple practice in all activities.

Practicing with our eyes closed in the meditation hall does limit the objects to some extent. We're still. Our bodies are still; our eyes are closed. We feel the touch sense of the body, things in the mind, and perhaps sounds. Those three sense doors are predominant in sitting meditation. When we shift into walking practice, we need to start to explore how to stay present with a wider range of sense experience, in particular, to begin to explore what it means to be aware while seeing and hearing.

As we walk, seeing becomes quite predominant. In some other forms of walking meditation, we might restrict our vision and keep our attention grounded on the feet. In this style of practice, we practice open awareness while walking also. *Am I aware? What am I aware of?*

To begin a period of walking practice, I would encourage you to start with relaxation of body. Begin by finding a pace that feels relaxing. So walk, find a pace that feels comfortable. Find a

pace where your body can feel at ease, and then begin to check in, *Oh, what is the mind aware of?* The movement is another main experience in the walking, the feeling of the body moving. Some movement of the body may be obvious, the contact of the feet on the ground may be obvious, the swinging of the arms, sights, sounds also may be obvious. So can you just keep that gentle attention of, *Aware? Of what? Aware of what?*

Sometimes when we are walking, we can get very joyful in seeing nature. That is OK! Just notice the joy. Noticing the delight that can happen, too. Just being aware of all of it.

While you're walking, you might begin to notice a distinction *seeing* and *looking*. Seeing can have a receptive quality, just a general knowing that you are seeing. And then the attention might be drawn to look at something. So just noticing that shift. You might be seeing in a broad, panoramic way, and then, perhaps a bird flies by and suddenly you're looking at that bird. This is not a problem, you don't have to stop looking at the bird, or try to not look at the bird. But just notice that the attention has moved from seeing to looking.

If we don't notice that shift from seeing to looking, that shift is often where the mind tends to wander out and get lost. If you didn't notice the shift to looking, the mind tends to start thinking about what we looked at. If you looked at a bird and didn't notice the looking, you might start thinking, *oh, what kind of bird is that? Oh, I think I see a little bit of red..* and you're gone. So noticing the transition from seeing to looking.

Similarly we can practice noticing the shift from hearing to listening. Are you in a flow of just noticing hearing is happening? Can you notice when the attention shifts to listening to a sound? Hearing to listening. If we don't notice that movement, we tend to follow the chain of thought.

Becoming aware of the shift from seeing to looking, or from hearing to listening, we are becoming more aware of noticing when attention shifts. We can see this also in sitting meditation: we can notice when the attention is more receptive, and when it's more directed. So starting to get familiar with that, through seeing and hearing.

Again to summarize: *Aware? What am I aware of?* From time to time, check in: *What's the relationship?* Other questions to explore the attitude: *How am I with experience?, How is experiencing impacting me?*

So, I would like you to play with it. The whole practice, I feel, is really about play. Play with exploring these tools that I've offered.

Guided Meditation

Relax the muscles of your head and face: the muscles around your eyes and mouth, letting your face be soft. The face and the mind are so intimately connected. As we relax our face, it can very help the mind to relax.

Relax the jaw; the neck; softening the muscles of the shoulders; around the collarbone; around the shoulder blades. You might even find it possible to relax inside the shoulder socket a little bit.

Relax the arms, softening the muscles of the arms, including the elbows, the wrists, the hands, letting the fingers be soft.

Relax the muscles of the chest and upper back, all the muscles around the rib cage. Sometimes a deeper breath can support some of relaxation in this area. Try taking a deep breath and notice how the stretching happens around the rib cage on the in breath, and how there can be a softening on the out breath.

Now let the breathing return to normal.

Continue to explore the conscious relaxation of the muscles of the stomach and abdomen, relaxing the middle and lower back, relaxing the hips. It also might be possible to soften a little bit within the hip socket.

Relax the legs, the knees, ankles, and feet.

You can also check in to see if it is possible to relax deep inside your body. It is not always possible, but perhaps the inside the throat can relax. Maybe the heart can relax. Maybe the stomach and intestines can relax.

Sometimes the mind has an understanding about how to relax that we don't conscious access to. We might be able to support this understanding with a request, an invitation: *May the body relax*. Not trying to do the relaxation, just dropping the invitation in to your mind and body and see how it responds. The body might relax a little bit more: *May the body relax*.

Is there any mental tension that can be released? Thoughts of the past or future can create tension in the mind. See if you can let go of the pull to the past and the future, in favor of connecting with the experience here and now. Relax and receive: *May the body relax. May the mind relax.*

With whatever relaxation is available, check in: *Are you aware?* Do you know that you are aware? This is not something to look hard for, but just to recognize: *Aware, this is what it is like to be, aware.*

What is obvious? What is the most obvious experience? Perhaps sound. Perhaps body sensation. Maybe the breath. Maybe an emotion or mood.

What's obvious? No need to choose what to pay attention to. Settle back and notice what awareness is already attending to; it's always attending to something.

Are you aware? What's obvious? Gently, persistently reminding yourself to be aware, and notice what awareness is knowing.

If it feels like the mind is thrashing around trying to find something to be aware of, just pick an obvious experience such as the breath, some familiar meditation object or experience, and start there, connect to that experience. At some point, as you are aware of that experience you will notice other experiences being known – sounds, other body sensations, states of mind. Then you can explore receiving this flow of experience, letting go of staying with any particular experience.

We can know any experience. Perhaps sleepiness is obvious; perhaps confusion is obvious, or maybe it is just simple sound, hearing, pressure, vibration, pulsing, hardness, heat, moment after moment. *Aware of what?* Gently, persistently reminding yourself to be aware.

If the mind wanders into thought, at some point you will recognize that. You will wake up, knowing you have been thinking, that the mind has been lost, not aware. In that moment, recognize that you are aware. In that moment, we can get to know the experience of awareness itself, the clarity of being aware now can be seen in contrast to the and the experience of being lost a few moments before. Noticing what is obvious, what is awareness aware of? It is already aware of something. What is it aware of?

After noticing that you are aware again, and recognizing what you are aware of, it can be helpful to recognize whether tension has crept in while the mind was wandering. Often when our mind wanders off into thought, our habitual patterns return. So it is very natural for the body to get tense again. If that has happened, give yourself an opportunity to relax again, and then return to the simple exploration: *Am I aware? Aware of what?*

From time to time check in to your relationship with experience. Do you want something to happen? Do you want something to stop happening? Is there confusion, disconnection? Or perhaps, the mind is at ease: no problem?

If an attitude is revealed, just allow that to be part of the landscape of which you are aware. No need to focus on it, just allow it to be known along with all the other experiences.

Relax. Keep it simple: Are you aware? What is obvious

Evening Reflection: Allowing and Love

The first day of a retreat can be exhausting. We often fall asleep, lose awareness, even as we make the effort to stay present. Most of us are probably familiar with our own first day retreat pattern; we know this is what we have to go through at the beginning of a retreat.

Although we may feel like we just have to get through these first few days, they really are an integral part of our practice. They set the stage for us; no moments of mindfulness are wasted.

We need to get the engine going, and for each of us it has a particular way of starting. There is no way to avoid the starting, so please appreciate yourself; appreciate the work, the practice that you have been engaged in today.

All of you have been cultivating so many beautiful qualities, although it may not quite feel that way.

Every time you reconnect with experience, mindfulness and energy are being cultivated. Each time you simply remind yourself that this is what the beginning of retreat is like, patience is being cultivated.

The practice of simple noticing supports the cultivation of allowing and acceptance of our experience. This practice can seem dry, since it is a wisdom-orientated practice. Yet the very

way wisdom grows is through an allowing, attention. And this allowing itself has the flavor of *metta*, of love, of kindness.

As we open to allowing our experience we can also become aware of the quality of kindness that comes with the allowing. Being aware of it further reinforces the heartfelt quality of practice—the open heartedness of receiving what is offered.

As we practice, the qualities of wisdom and love grow together. If we also appreciate this aspect of our practice, not only does our heart grow in understanding, it stretches with love and compassion to meet everything in our experience.

Day 2

Sleepiness, Restlessness and Thinking

Each day I'll offer some reflections about working with particular experiences, or exploring different aspects of the practice. Today I thought I'd speak a little bit about a few experiences in our meditation that tend to be challenging for us, that tend to be places where we get caught, or lost easily - **sleepiness**, **restlessness**, and **thoughts**.

We tend to have a habit of not being mindful of these experiences. Because of that, we may think that it's not possible to be mindful of them, or that they are inherently problematic in our meditation. For instance, we might believe, *I can't be mindful, if I'm this sleepy*.

We need to be wise about whether it's appropriate to explore being present for a difficult experience, or whether it's appropriate to take an action, to change something in our meditation. With sleepiness, restlessness, and thoughts, when we hold the belief that we can't be mindful of them, very often we quickly try to change something.

Since it is possible to be mindful of these experiences, I'd like to suggest that you explore that possibility before taking an action. So try it out. Play with it. If we think of the whole practice as a playground, it can simply become: *There's sleepiness, let's play with sleepiness*. If you play with sleepiness and fall asleep, so be it! It's just sleepiness.

Explore and experiment, play with the edges of those experiences where it's hard for you to be mindful. See if it's possible in *this* moment. See if you can *be aware* while experiencing the difficulty! Being aware of the difficulty doesn't mean it will necessarily go away. However, if trying to be aware of a difficulty, you quickly lose mindfulness, then it can be helpful to use some of the tools that support your mindfulness with difficulty.

Exploring experiences that I thought I couldn't be mindful of is a powerful way I've stretched the boundaries in my own practice. If I have the thought *I can't be mindful of that*, I don't believe that thought any more. Instead, I begin to explore how *might* it be possible? Trying over and over again to let mindfulness go into areas where I thought it was not possible to be mindful. It is possible to be mindful of more than you can imagine. Spacing out for instance, seems like inherently a non mindful state. But not necessarily. It's possible to be present in the state of spacing out.

So **sleepiness**. Is it possible to be mindful of sleepiness? Often when we're sleepy, we're working at odds with what the mind is naturally doing. When the mind is sleepy, it has low energy. It's often not that interested in investigating or meeting an experience clearly. The state of mind itself is kind of foggy, it has a kind of a misty quality to it. It's like the morning fog here at the retreat center.

Objects in our experience can have very different qualities: some objects can be clear and precise. You can clearly know, *that's a sound, or, that's a sight..* Sleepiness, has a different quality, it's like a mist. It's a vague object, it is not going to be a clear, precise experience. So like the fog in the morning, the sleepiness is the atmosphere that we're in. On a foggy day, if you're trying to clearly see every leaf on a tree, it's not possible. And likewise, when we're in a sleepy, or foggy, or dull state of mind, if we're trying to clearly see the breath, or some sensation, that sleepy mind may not have the capacity to do that.

Looking out the window on a foggy day, we can't see the trees clearly, but we know our eyes are working, we know that it's foggy. Likewise, there is the possibility of being aware: *sleepiness is happening*. We don't need to have precise awareness of the details of experience, like the fog, sleepiness can obscure details. We can simply be aware that sleepiness is happening. That's enough.

Keep noticing. Becoming aware of sleepiness, you might notice the body being relaxed, or soft. Sleepiness can affect the body. Or, perhaps you might notice the mind has a pleasant quality.

If we are fighting sleepiness, if we think it's a problem, the overall experience of sleepiness will probably feel unpleasant. But when we start to just simply know it for what it is, without resistance, it's often pleasant. Seeing this, we can begin to recognize how our attitude alters the experience.

When sleepiness arises, it is helpful to check the attitude, often we want it to go away. But, once we start to get familiar with the experience of sleepiness, it can be fun to be aware of it. Playing with the possibility of awareness of sleepiness.

After playing with awareness of sleepiness for a little while, if you find that you are just asleep on the cushion, then it's probably time to open your eyes, maybe take a walk. Sometimes I find

sitting up a little straighter can help bring in some energy. You can use some of the tools that are antidotes to low energy.

Restlessness is a state of mind that feels unsettled. It might feel like the attention is jumping, swirling or agitated. We might believe it is not possible for a restless mind to be present with anything. But again, can we take a step back and understand: *this is the experience of restlessness*. We might have the idea that we need to clearly know every single thing that the mind is noticing. Instead, try stepping back and notice the restless state of the mind itself.

Yesterday I noticed restlessness in my meditation. At first I recognized, *restlessness is happening*. I was hanging with it in a resigned way. The mind was not clearly mindful, especially of the resignation, but it also wasn't non mindful. It was one of these *more-or-less-mindful* places that Joseph Goldstein talks about. But I noticed that more-or-less-mindful quality.

So I checked in: *What's going on here? There is restlessness, and I don't like it. Restlessness and not liking is happening*. As the not liking was clearly seen, the not liking fell away, and there was just the restlessness. It was unpleasant.

Restlessness does tend to be unpleasant, unlike sleepiness. In my experience, the mind was trying to detach from the discomfort of the restlessness. When the mind clearly noticed the not liking, it could simply be aware of restless mind. There was a little bit of unpleasantness of the restlessness, and yet there was also the okay-ness of just knowing the restlessness. The whole experience shifts, when we can simply know what's happening with the attitude of balance.

Sometimes the energy of restlessness feels very big. We might have a habit of trying to contain that energy, perhaps thinking: *I better not let this get too big it'll go crazy if I let it get too big*. But actually, trying to kind of contain it is like putting it in a pressure cooker. It's almost more agitating. So sometimes we can explore a sense of letting awareness go wide, which gives the restless energy more space. It's like giving a young colt a big pasture, in which to run off all of its energy.

Thoughts are a natural function of our mind. Just as the function of the eye is to see, one of the functions of the mind is to produce thoughts. Another function of the mind is to be aware. And

so, the mind will do its job of producing thoughts and emotions, and the mind also can know those thoughts and emotions.

The sense base of the mind is a little bit different from the other sense bases. The objects of the other sense bases are external. The objects of sight are out in the world. The eye sees them and consciousness creates an internal representation of the object. The original thing that the eye and the mind are responding to is outside of us. In the mind, the mind both produces thoughts, and knows thoughts. So it's a little more confusing.

We may have the idea that when the mind is thinking, it can't possibly be mindful. This is just a belief. Question these beliefs! It is possible to be mindful while thinking.

We usually cannot simply choose to stop thinking! Thoughts arise from conditions. Thinking is a conditioned phenomenon. When we start to look at it, seeing thinking happening a great place to recognize, *I don't have control over those thoughts; they're just arising!* The uncontrollability of thinking is not a problem, in fact it points to the truth not-self. The Buddha points to the uncontrollable nature of experience as evidence for this truth. To paraphrase the Buddha:

“Thoughts are not self. If thoughts were self, thoughts would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to say of thoughts, may thoughts be thus. May thoughts not be thus. But because thoughts are not self, thoughts lead to affliction, and it is not possible to say of thoughts: May thoughts be thus, may thoughts not be thus”

(paraphrased from the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya 22:59)

So we can't stop thinking necessarily. There are conditions that can be cultivated that will reduce the number of thoughts in the mind, and meditation is one of those conditions. Yet thoughts continue to arise, and we can learn to be mindful of them. Awareness while we are thinking is particularly supportive for daily life. If we have the idea that we cannot be mindful while thinking, huge chunks of our daily life are out of bounds for mindfulness.

The first thing to recognize, when you notice that you're thinking, is: *this is the mind doing its job. A thought is just a thought.* Just knowing that. *Thinking is happening. The mind is producing thoughts.* You're becoming aware of the natural functioning of the mind.

One helpful way of being aware of thinking is to noticing how thinking is happening, rather than being engaged in the content. I sometimes call this noticing the modality of the thoughts. Be aware of how the mind is thinking. There are many different ways that the mind thinks: it may think with images, or as if one is speaking to oneself, or as if things are being heard, like listening to radio. It can also think through a kinesthetic sense in the body. Noticing the modality of the thought, rather than orienting to the content can help us to be aware of thinking more easily.

A thought arises in the present moment. Thoughts of the past, are a phenomenon arising now, in the present moment. Thoughts of the future are a phenomenon arising now, in the present moment. Sometimes we can simply recognize a thought is simply a presently arising phenomenon.

When the mind emphasizes the content of thoughts, it's easy to be seduced into the world of thoughts, to believe their reality. The thoughts create their own little world, and we tend to inhabit that world. It's a little bubble of delusion. While the mind can have a habit entering into that bubble and losing mindfulness, it's not inherent in thinking to lose mindfulness while thinking.

We can be aware and know the content of thinking. When we are in formal meditation, we might have the option to set aside the content, the particulars of a given thought. Yet, there times our day where we need to think, simply to take care of ourselves. Or sometimes strong thoughts come unbidden from the past, or project into the future, and the content is impactful. At times it can be helpful to acknowledge the content, and how the content of thinking affects us.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggests, when the content seems compelling, to allow 50% of the attention to take in the content of the thought, and 50% of the attention to connect with the effect thoughts have on you. There's the content of the thought, and there's the effect that the content has. You can be aware of both.

Much of the time in formal meditation, we don't need to engage with the content of the thoughts. Sometimes we can set them aside. Yet, sometimes we can't set them aside. If that's happening, rather than getting frustrated and trying to force the thought to stop, check in, how is it affecting the heart, mind, and body? Is it creating tension? Are there other bodily sensations? Are there

emotions arising? This investigation doesn't have to be a looking for, a trying to figure out what else is happening. It's more like a broadening of experience, to check in: *What else is happening right now, connected to thinking?*

If the thoughts are so strong that it's not possible to be mindful, that's a good time to redirect the attention. Try putting your attention more on a clear and obvious experience and just stay there. Experimenting, playing, exploring whether it's possible to be mindful of these challenging states, before you assume its not possible.

Guided Meditation: Simple

Allowing a relaxation of the body. *May the body relax.*

Scanning through the body and relaxing the muscles. Relaxing the face. Perhaps the core of the body can relax. Maybe the throat can relax. Maybe the heart can relax. Maybe the stomach and the intestines can relax.

Relaxing the body supports relaxation of mind: *May the mind relax.*

With whatever relaxation is available for you in this moment, just notice: Are you aware? What is obvious?

Reminding yourself to be aware in a gentle, but persistent way. Just the lightest of touches. Simple. Aware? Of what?

What is already happening? There's nothing to create, nothing to do. Experience will arise. Experience will come to you. Cultivate a gentle persistence, which supports a continuity of mindfulness. Continuity of mindfulness will reveal more of what's happening.

Patience with the experience. Just the simplicity of *what's obvious right now in this mind and body?* Nothing to create. Very little to do. No one to be.

And recognizing for yourself, if an experience arises that is so strong that it overwhelms the possibility of mindfulness, then grounding, connecting with an experience that's easy for you to connect with.

Evening Reflection: Trust

This practice requires trust: trust in the simplicity of practice, and trust in ourselves. It can be challenging to just be with a very simple exploration of what is here right now, rather than having an agenda to create or construct something. Sometimes our mind is not satisfied with this simplicity. It can be hard to trust a simple noticing of a confusion in the mind, or a simple noticing of a sight or a smell or taste. The question can arise: *What's next?* or, *Why am I doing this* or *Is this enough?*

Sometimes we want evidence that lets us know that we're doing it "right" but often such evidence doesn't show up. Especially in this practice. It can take longer for the mind to settle. So we need to trust that this very simple noticing that we are aware, and what we are aware of, will lead to stability of mind. And further, we have to trust when this simple awareness stabilizes that it opens to wisdom; to understanding. We have to take it on faith essentially, take it on trust that, "*Yes, this is worthwhile.*"

The simplicity of this practice is really the simplicity of entering into *Now*. Entering into life as it is in *this* moment. This is all that there is. There is nothing else. The exploration of meeting this moment, is an exploration of being alive. What does it mean to be alive? If we're not here, aware, knowing, experiencing this moment –in this Now, and this Now, and this Now –then we are missing our lives. A *Dhammapada* verse expresses this starkly as: *one who is not aware is as if already dead.*

We are missing our lives when we are not present, and this is a practice of learning how to be present. Can we trust that? Can we trust that being present is enough? Sometimes the trust is especially needed when staying present feels challenging. We might need to remind ourselves of the value of being present for *dukkha*, to understand how the mind is caught in suffering.

With trust we can remind ourselves that the practice is helpful. Over time our confidence in the practice grows, and we know for ourselves how helpful the practice is. It then becomes easier to trust when the practice gets difficult again.

Sometimes we need trust because the practice seems so simple. The work of practice is simply reminding ourselves to be aware. We need patience and trust that allows the momentum of awareness to build naturally and gradually, which allows wisdom to emerge. In my first retreat

with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, I was doubtful of this simplicity. I thought: “*Yeah, I'm aware, I'm present, and it's pretty light touch. This practice can't possibly lead to wisdom. It's too simple. It's too easy.*”

I needed trust at that moment; trust in the organic and gradual nature of the learning. Practice often follows a course of a very gradual wearing away of reactivity. On occasion we may experience a sudden insight, but more often practice unfolds with a very gradual transformation that is hardly perceptible. Moment by moment.

In one *sutta*, the Buddha talks about a carpenter using a hammer. As the carpenter uses their hammer each day a little bit of the handle wears away and it gets smoother. Even though the carpenter doesn't notice that each day the handle has worn a bit more, over time they see, “*This handle is worn.*” They can pick it up, and feel how it fits the hand, because it has worn down in that manner. Similarly, we also can learn to trust that day by day there is an imperceptible shift. Patience and trust go hand and hand.

Day 3

Supports for Continuity: A guided meditation

Sometimes Sayadaw expresses the practice in terms of three “yogi jobs”: cultivate right view, be aware of what's happening in the present moment, and cultivate continuity of mindfulness. We orient the attention towards right view, the understanding of what is skillful and unskillful, recognizing that experience is just arising in the present moment. Be aware. *Are you aware? What are you aware of?* A light touch, a persistent recognition of awareness in the present moment. This is one of the supports for continuity.

As the retreat continues, you might find that verbalizing questions in the mind adds tension. If that is happening, try backing off, lighten it a little. You could shorten the questions: *Aware? Of what?* You could also play with having the questions be like a whisper in the mind, or even a subvocal *Hmm?* As the practice continues over time we develop a sense of how to encourage awareness and momentum without the use of questions.

A light touch of effort. Gentle persistence. Remind yourself to be aware. Are you curious about experience? Curiosity is a natural motivator. The more curious about our experience we are, the more likely to maintain awareness. As we get more familiar with the experience of being aware, we can start to get curious about how we lose awareness. We have our own familiar ways of losing awareness.

As we are familiar with the experience of being aware, we can start to recognize when there is a loosening of connection to experience. Can we be curious, not necessarily to try to force the attention to stay connected, but be curious about that loosening of attention itself? Where does the attention want to go? Can mindfulness follow it? Whenever the mind wanders, it usually means we've missed something, something we haven't noticed. Can we be curious about *What am I not seeing?*

Don't try to force yourself to see what it is we are not seeing! Because often the activity of trying to see something will obscure the very thing we are trying to see. Instead, try settling back and checking in, *What's being missed? What am I missing?* Yet, not looking for it but just allowing that question to encourage an opening to things we may have missed. It's hard to look for something that we don't know, and so it takes a kind of settling back and being receptive with just a simple question *What am I missing?* Curiosity.

Curiosity about the simple experience of life. Curiosity about the ordinariness of experience. How do this mind and body do their thing? It's kind of amazing, this mind and body. And yet we take it for granted, the ordinary becomes dismissible. Not important to us. Can we begin to approach the ordinary with fresh eyes? There is a sound. How amazing! Body sensations simply arise and are known, an amazing process that just happens. How amazing! All of this happens without needing to have anybody doing it. It just happens. Try to stop hearing. How amazing.

Do you understand the value of awareness and wisdom? Do you understand the value of the practice? There are ways in which you all understand this or you wouldn't even be here. When you are aware, you might experience a simple shift that can happen around a challenging mind state, you might see awareness and wisdom creates a container of more balance. Right there, that's the value of the practice. Freedom, in that moment. The presence of mind that's simply here in the moment, knowing sound, know body sensations, knowing the arising of thoughts and emotions. That awareness and wisdom creating the conditions for the reactivity to not even arise. How valuable is that?

Sayadaw sometimes said, says, If we really understood the value of awareness and wisdom, we would never stop practicing. As we see the value of the practice, this also supports continuity. Gentle persistent effort, a light touch, curiosity, and understanding the value of the practice... just being here for what's happening, what's already happening,

Further Reflections on Continuity

I wanted to say a few words about using questions in the practice. At this point we've explored just some basic questions: *Am I aware? What am I aware of? What's my attitude?* Even with these questions, as simple as they are, if we don't quite understand how to work with questions in the practice, we will end up looking for something or trying to answer the question somehow. The use of questions is more about sparking curiosity than trying to actually answer the question.

An image can help to describe what I mean: Imagine there's a smooth pond with no ripples on it at all. If you take a stone and drop it into that pond, it creates ripples. Then you can just watch the ripples. It does not take a lot of effort to notice the impact that the stone has on the smooth pond. So is it with questions—just drop the question into the mind and body and don't look for an answer. Don't think about the answer; don't try to find anything, but just notice what happens.

Just continue being aware. On the occasions when I use the question, *Am I aware?* in a few moments, the sense of awareness is very clear and I did not have to do that. The question itself orients the mind to explore. We do not use the questions to try to figure something out or find answers, but to allow and open to whatever happens.

When checking the attitude, sometimes rather than asking the question *What's the attitude?* or *What's the relationship?* you could sometimes simply ask *Is there anything else here?* This can be another way into the noticing the attitude. Or you could ask: *Is there something I'm not noticing in this experience?* Sometimes asking these questions helps the mind to take a broader perspective on the experience. It can feel like stepping back a bit, almost like asking *Is the awareness a little narrow? Can the awareness take in more? Is there something not being seen?*

I'd like to elaborate on one of the supports for continuity—in the guided meditation, I mentioned curiosity and noticing where we lose awareness. Exploring where we lose awareness is very helpful. As you go through your day, there will probably be places or activities in which you habitually lose awareness. Just start to get familiar with those. Do you lose awareness when you go into your room? Do you lose awareness when you go through the meal line? Do you lose awareness between getting up from the sitting to go for a walking meditation?

Start to notice where you lose awareness, but then rather than using effort to try to hold the attention there, get curious about what happens. What happens in that place? What happens when I go into my room? Whenever mindfulness fades we are missing something. What are we not seeing? Just get curious about it.

Over and over again, we will start those activities and forget. Over and over again, we will get lost, and wake up, *I didn't see it again!* Just keep trying; no need for self-recrimination or self judgement. Just keep re-committing. *Missed it again. Wow look how amazing, how amazing the mind is that it has these strong habits.*

Sometimes the ways in which awareness slips out can be very subtle, and it takes some patience and continuity to begin to reveal those moments.

If we recognize over the course of the day that we lose awareness every time we go into our room, that might be a place to explore. We might realize we need to go to our room to get something, and aware that we tend to lose awareness on our room, we might see if there can be

some curiosity about what happens. Not to try to force ourselves to be mindful, but to be curious what happens in the room.

As we recognize the places we lose awareness, see if you can be curious; add a little interest to that place or that time. As you are going through the meal line, if you can notice you lose awareness at lunch time, you might just start to see where it is that you got lost. Do you get lost while you're standing in the line or are you pretty aware while you're standing in line. Maybe it is when you actually sit at the table that you get lost in the food. Or maybe you are aware all the way through the serving table, and as soon as you start trying to navigate the tea station, reactivity arises because of all the people around. How do you get lost? Where? What happens? Curiosity.

Evening Reflection: Appreciating the Wholesome

Sometimes at the end of a day of practice we can just be tired. We may be hoping for the end of the day and that moment when we slip between the sheets. There may be a sense of, *“What have I been doing all day?”*

Sometimes it helps to consciously remember, to think back over the day, and reflect on the wholesome qualities that have been strengthened that day. Remembering moments of patience, or generosity, or kindness. Remembering that your intentions were to be more mindful, to stabilize mindfulness, to encourage concentration and steadiness of mind. Remembering moments of equanimity or balance of mind. Recalling moments of joy, of appreciation of beauty, of appreciation of the ability to recognize something clearly, even for a brief time.

I sometimes take five minutes at the end of my day and remember, *“This is what happened. This is what I did today.”* I practice thinking from the perspective of the wholesome, rather than the perspective of *dukkha*, suffering. I can often find many things I had forgotten. *“Oh yeah, there was that moment, that moment of patience and that moment of delight.”* It can uplift the heart at the end of the day to remember all of the beautiful qualities that this practice supports and cultivates; the ways in which it opens our hearts.

During that reflection, it can also be interesting to recognize that the reflection affects experience right in the moment. *“How does this reflection impact my experience right now?”* I often find my heart becoming lighter with a sense of joy in remembering, *“Yes, this day was well spent.”*

Then, slipping between the sheets can be a very pleasant moment. So be there for it. Be aware of it. Recognize how the body relaxes into the pleasure of present awareness.

Do not underestimate the power of a very simple awareness. This simple awareness can receive, can know experience—whatever experience arises—without reactivity. It seems so simple in the moment, but it is incredibly powerful. As the continuity grows, every moment, every experience no matter how simple, can show us how to wake up, if we are available for it.

Day 4

Body and Mind: Conditionality

Exploring awareness and what we are aware of, we start to recognize different processes that make up this being: physical process and mental processes. There are processes related to the body, the physical senses: experiences related to sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. In the touch sense the experiences include pressure, pulsing, heat, coolness, vibration, hardness. In the ear experience includes pitch and tone of sound. When the eyes are open, we see form and color. Bodily experiences can be fairly obvious. Often, especially in the early days of retreat, the physical senses are quite easy to be aware of.

There are also processes of mind that the Buddha highlighted:

- Feeling tone: whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;
- Intentional activity of mind: including a whole range of emotions, and minds states such as mindfulness and concentration, and compassion and equanimity.
- Perception: the process of recognizing experience. Our mind recognizes experience through familiarity, we hear a sound and recognize it's a bird. We see a sight and recognize it's a tree or a wall or a person.
- Knowing: a very basic function that simply knows experience.

One of the easiest ways to begin to see mental processes is in contrast to physical processes. Perhaps surprisingly, we can confuse mental and physical processes. This can happen partly because physical and mental processes are quite interrelated. But when we can clearly recognize what aspect of experience is physical, we can recognize the mental processes that are connected to it, and we begin to tease apart the difference between body and mind

We may be aware of a specific physical experience, such as pressure, pulsing, aching, pulling or twisting. There are a number of mental processes that might happen in relationship to physical sensation. Perhaps a relationship of liking or not liking, or anger, frustration, irritation, or wanting. All of these relationships are mental experience. Exploring how the mind relates to physical sensations is one of the easiest ways to notice both the difference between body and mind, and the interrelationship between them. It is clear that a sensation of pressure and tightness is different from anger, for instance.

An emotional (*mental*) relationship to sensations is often based on whether the physical experience (e.g. pressure, pulsing, tingling, vibration) is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The

pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (or *feeling tone*) quality associated with a physical sensation is also a *mental* experience. The experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is not inherent in the actual physical sensation. The same sensation might be experienced as pleasant or unpleasant, depending on conditions. We can recognize that a physical sensation and the feeling tone associated with it are different aspects of the experience. This helps us start to recognize that feeling tone is a mental process.

Another function of mind recognizes experience based on memory, and what it has learned and been taught. This is the process of *perception*. The perceptual process takes care of us: we recognize objects in the world, such as walls, doors, and people, and instantly know something about them, such that trying to walk through a wall doesn't work. Perception is an automatic process that helps us navigate the world; we couldn't function without perception.

Yet we often don't recognize perception as perception, and we unknowingly relate to experience through the idea of it, rather than through the actual experience of it. Instead of relating to an experience of vibration, burning, tingling as simply vibration, burning, tingling, we relate to it as, for example, a painful hand, which is an idea of the experience, rather than direct experience. Relating to an experience through the idea of it means that we might be relating to experience based on views and beliefs about the idea, rather than what is actually happening.

We can't stop the process of perception, but we can begin to recognize perception at work. Perception is a rudimentary form of thought that identifies or recognizes experience. You might play with this in sitting meditation, perhaps around the physical sense of hearing. Sound itself is just vibration of the air contacting the eardrum, resulting in pitch and tone of that sound. That is the hearing, yet very quickly the mind identifies the sound, as perhaps *Bird*. Perception arises as a basic thought: the mind might label the sound with the word "bird," or it might see an image of a bird, or even see the word "bird" as if printed on a page. The thought of the bird is a perception, and it is different than the experience of hearing. This is noticing perception at work.

We can begin to recognize these processes happening, notice that they are interrelated and that they condition each other. As mindfulness gets stronger, we can begin to notice how these different processes interact. For example, we might notice how a body sensation conditions a reaction. Perhaps a tightness in the knee is experienced as unpleasant, and frustration arises. We can notice the conditioned nature of experience, which helps us recognize that these experiences are just processes tumbling on. There isn't any one in charge of these processes. No one deciding

I'm going to perceive now. Rather, a sound arises and perception happens. Also, we don't *decide* to react. A reaction is simply a habit conditioned from prior experience and patterns. Seeing these processes as related and conditioned helps us to understand there's not a "self" in charge of them.

We can notice bodily experience conditioning mental experience: the sweet taste of a cookie, and its pleasantness conditioning delight and perhaps wanting. Mental experience can in turn condition physical experience: Pleasure, delight, wanting, wanting another cookie, intending to get another cookie, intention conditioning movement, action of body. We stand up and go get a cookie. We can watch these processes unfold. Even in simple and seemingly trivial experiences we can see the conditioned nature of experience.

The nature of experience is conditioned. Directly seeing how the mind and body condition each other is very liberating. We simply observe our experience and begin to recognize, these connected conditioned processes.

The workings of our body and mind are quite amazing, very complex, and yet it is a simple mindfulness that sees and understand this complexity. A simple process of awareness, recognizing what we are aware of and checking our relationship. That's the practice. The complex workings of body and mind are revealed. It may not be helpful to *try* to notice these processes, but rather, just let the information about these physical and mental information settle into the background of your mind, and continue the simplicity of the practice. *Aware? of what? Aware? Aware? Aware?* Having information about how these process work might support your seeing that they are already happening.

Intention and Motivation

Are you aware? Can there be a relaxed awareness? Aware, with a mind that is not pushing to find something or trying to get away from anything, just a simple, relaxed, allowing awareness?

With simple awareness many things can be known: many different kinds of functions, of mind states, of body experience, of feelings. Even the knowing itself can be known. The steadier and simpler the awareness, the more it can reveal.

With a steady simple awareness, we might begin to recognize the impulses that move us: a mental urge or impulse to do, to act. Every action of body, of speech, or of mind is preceded by a

mental impulse. This impulse is subtle and yet it can be noticed. We can know we're going to move before we move. We can know we're going to speak before we speak. We can even know we're going to think before we think.

We sometimes call this impulse an *intention*; yet this intention is not necessarily a conscious choice. It can be a conscious choice but it also can simply be conditioned. We might sit for a while and thirst arises, conditioning the desire to relieve thirst, conditioning the intention get up and get some water. In this process a conscious choice to get up might have happened, or it might not! Sometimes we can see that intentions can simply arise, that it is just a process unfolding. As the mindfulness is more steady and more simple, we can see this conditioned process.

In sitting, intention may be most clear related to body movements like the lifting of a hand or a straightening of the spine. It's possible to recognize, before the movement, a subtle impulse moment of about-to-move. You might recognize that you know you're going to move before you move. Sometimes we can also see an intention for not moving, an intention for keeping our eyes closed or keeping our bodies still. This impulse is a subtle aspect of mind that can be noticed, yet often it is not something we can look for, or *try* to see: in fact, looking for it might get in the way of the seeing!

Intentions doesn't arise randomly. They are conditioned. They arise with a motivation: a reason why we want to act. Sometimes a motivation can be based in greed, aversion, or delusion. How many times do we move with complete unawareness, delusion perhaps participating in the motivation? How many times do we move out of aversion, wanting to get away from an unpleasant experience? How many times do we move out of greed, wanting to get something pleasant? Yet wholesome mind states can also motivate action: wisdom motivates, love motivates, compassion motivates.

When we become aware of an intention to act, sometimes we also become aware of the motivation that comes with it. If the motivation is based in greed, aversion or delusion, awareness of it might allow us to simply witness the reactive motivation: open to it, relax, observe, allow, and learn about that motivation. Sometimes we can watch such an impulse simply arise and pass. The mind simply observes this, learns from it, which in turn strengthens the intentions for mindfulness and wisdom.

Intention and motivation are intertwined with the cause and effect cycle of our experience, shaping our experience in each moment. We often strongly identify with intention. It feels like I am the one choosing, I am the one deciding, I am the one acting. As we become aware of the arising of an intention and the arising of the motivation accompanying the intention, we can begin to understand not-self: sometimes we see that no one decided for an intention to arise, it simply arose based on causes and conditions.

This exploration of intention and motivation is just a description of experience that might be seen as awareness becomes steadier; intention is not necessarily something to *try* to notice. Just continue with a relaxed, allowing awareness. As awareness becomes steadier, it can naturally begin to notice subtler experience such as intention.

Evening Reflection: Knowing Beautiful Qualities

As the mind becomes more balanced when observing experience, we can start to recognize beautiful qualities that grow as we practice: calm and peace, confidence, and maybe even joy. People often describe the interesting experience of noticing something challenging and being aware of delight in the watching itself. These beautiful qualities grow with wise attitude.

The more we experience balance of mind, the more we can open to and be interested in the balanced mind itself. What is the experience of a balanced mind? What is the experience of calm, peace, ease or joy, or confidence? There are so many different ways wise attitude can be felt. How is it for you? These wholesome qualities are nourished by the very practice that supports our freedom, our awakening.

The presence of mindfulness with wise view nourishes these beautiful qualities of mind, and simultaneously, it weakens the hindrances and reactive states—states based on greed, aversion and delusion. It sometimes feels almost like magic: the magic power of mindfulness and wisdom.

Sometimes we can be more interested in what is observed and less curious about how we are observing. Yet it is very helpful to notice the relationship: We might notice that mindfulness and wisdom reveal hidden reactivity: *there is the pain in the knee and the not liking it. That's what's happening.* Yet, equally, mindfulness and wisdom can reveal hidden wholesome states: *there's pain in the knee and ease in the mind. That's what's happening.*

The presence of wise view might be experienced as love, compassion, joy, confidence, or calm. Or it might be experienced as wisdom, trust, interest or curiosity. Let yourself notice that, too. Mindfulness helps us get to know not only our reactive states, but also these beautiful qualities, even as we are observing something challenging,

We might think that when reactivity is happening, somehow our practice is a lesser practice, and the real practice will begin when all the reactivity is gone, and finally we can just be with impermanence, or just watch things and feel joyful.

Yet right in the midst of watching something very difficult—watching self-hatred; being with depression—the mind can understand very deeply, and there can be a deep letting go, right in the midst of being with that. Truly the practice does not wait until all the reactivity is at bay; freedom can happen in the midst of any experience. All objects, all experiences are equal, ultimately equal in terms of the possibility of wisdom and understanding arising.

It can take some time to trust this. It doesn't matter what the experience is. Really, really, it doesn't matter. We may have to borrow that wisdom at first and trust in its truth. Sayadaw U Tejaniya sometimes says 'The Dharma is everywhere'. Every experience, the simplest of experiences, can open us to deep understanding. Every single moment is a doorway to deep understanding. Are you willing to enter it?

Day 5

Awareness of Awareness (from a guided meditation)

Are you aware? Do you know that you are aware? What are you aware of?

Awareness of the objects of experience is usually our most familiar way of paying attention; of being with experience. We can recognize the specific qualities of the experience: in body sensations we might recognize heat or coolness, pressure, hardness or softness, tingling or vibration.

We can recognize some qualities of the mind-states. Anger, perhaps feels like a lashing out. Fear feels like pulling back, and happiness has an uplifting quality.

We are not as accustomed to noticing awareness itself, yet we can notice awareness itself. We can know awareness through how it experiences objects, awareness reveals itself through how it experience objects.

For those of us who wear glasses to correct vision, the glasses allow us to see the world more clearly. But we might not consciously recognize that we are seeing through the glasses, we simply know what we are seeing. Being aware of awareness is like being aware of the glasses: being aware that the clear seeing happens *because* of the glasses.

Being aware of awareness does not mean trying to look directly at awareness. For me, it feels like a stepping back, or a falling back, and knowing that things are experienced through awareness. Objects do not disappear when we become aware of awareness.

Are you aware? The mind has the capacity to recognize awareness as distinct from the specific experiences it is aware of. The simplest way is just knowing that you are aware. Do you know that you are aware? We may know that we are aware, without quite knowing how we know, and that is okay.

Over time we can become familiar with the sense of awareness itself.

We also might notice different ways awareness meets experience. Sometimes awareness takes individual, discrete experiences in succession: A sound, a body sensation, a thought, another body sensation. It might feel like awareness is flowing from one experience to another. Or, it

might feel as if awareness is jumping from experience to experience. It might feel like awareness is still and objects are coming into it.

It might feel like awareness is taking in many objects all at once. Or, awareness might feel focused and narrow on a specific experience, or broad on a more diffuse experience.

How is awareness receiving experience? There is no right way of noticing awareness, just notice how you are knowing awareness now.

Are you aware? Do you know that you are aware? Over time, we become more familiar with the experience of awareness itself—and it can be tempting to start looking for it, or trying to create it. Instead of trying to figure out how to be aware of awareness, it can be helpful instead to just notice when awareness is oriented towards the objects of experience, and when awareness is oriented towards noticing awareness. It is very natural for the awareness to flow between these two: sometimes aware of awareness, sometimes aware of objects.

In awareness of awareness, objects do not disappear, but there is a sense of knowing that you are aware. Sometimes the mind will be interested in the awareness, and sometimes in the objects. No need to have a preference for one or the other, just simply notice, *How is it working right now?*

Are you aware? What does awareness know? How is awareness receiving experience?

Evening Reflection: Accepting what is offered

Receiving experience...

Allowing awareness to simply open to what is already here, what is already known. There is no need to do anything or create anything to be aware of. It's really quite simple.

Encouraging a mind of allowing and acceptance—awareness that simply accepts what is offered in this moment. This is a form of letting go, of renunciation, to accept what is offered; not trying to construct anything, to find anything, to get rid of anything.

This experience—what is offered—can the heart open to it? Trusting the simplicity of opening to awareness and simply receiving experience. Sometimes we can trust in simply being aware.

At other times—if something overwhelming is happening—we may have be more active, choosing perhaps to pay attention to a neutral experience for awhile . Can we accept that something overwhelming has been offered too? Sometimes the wise response to an overwhelming experience is not rejection, not aversion, and also not trying to be with it directly, but rather a simple setting aside. Sometimes I have a sense of letting a difficult state just stay in the room with me. Letting it sit right next to me while I let my attention rest on something simple.

Sometimes we can get caught in ideas and concepts about how the mind works, but our *practice* is just simple. We cultivate a simple, steady awareness. The more continuous awareness is, the more it reveals. It can reveal an amazing complexity of our minds and experience! But it's not revealing that because we are doing something complicated or complex. In fact, what allows this revealing is the very simplicity of the presence of awareness.

Letting go of trying to find anything, or fix anything, or change anything. Being with what's offered.

Day 6

Recognizing Wisdom at Work

Our practice is cultivating a continuity of awareness in order to understand the processes at work in our minds, in particular the processes that create distress, dissatisfaction, struggle, and suffering. The simplicity of noticing experience and cultivating continuity of awareness, coupled with the intention to understand (*right view*), allows wholesome qualities begin to grow: qualities such as confidence, energy, patience, love, equanimity, calm, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom.

Wisdom is what understands and releases *dukkha*. We cannot decide, *I'm going to release dukkha*. When wisdom arises, *dukkha* is released. Suffering, stress, and dissatisfaction, are released. So we cultivate the *conditions* for the arising of wisdom, and let wisdom do its work. We need to be patient while continuing the basic work of awareness, knowing when we need to make personal effort to be aware, and when we can allow a natural awareness. Patience to simply be present and aware. If we're not present, wisdom won't arise.

Wisdom is a wholesome quality that functions in the present moment and can be recognized and directly known in the present moment. Just as with other wholesome qualities, recognizing the arising of wisdom is a condition that supports the further arising of wisdom.

There are many ways that wisdom can be experienced. There are probably too many ways to name, so I'll just offer a few. You may recognize a some of them.

When we are observing something challenging, being aware of a of struggle, we might recognize, even for a few moments: *This is struggle happening, this is just something happening in the present moment*. With that recognition there can be a shift, a sense of space around the struggle, and it is okay to be with that experience, even for just a few moments. Wisdom arising allows that shift to happen. We can recognize this shift as wisdom at work.

We might understand how causes and conditions come together in the moment. You might recognize, for instance, a memory arising, notice the memory triggering a chain of thought, and how that chain of thought leads to the arising of an emotion. Seeing this directly, as a sequence of events, we can understand the conditioned nature of it. Understanding the conditioned nature of our experience is wisdom at work.

We might recognize that reactivity is directly felt as suffering in the present moment. This may be a little harder to recognize as wisdom at work! And yet the direct recognition of *This is suffering* is an insight. We might not feel a shift that gives us space around reactivity, yet still we might recognize: *This reactivity is suffering right now in this body, in this mind. This is suffering.* A shift of perspective is needed to recognize reactivity as suffering. Early in my practice, it came as a shock to me to notice how painful the experience anger was in the moment. In the moment before, I had been involved in the story of anger, thinking about how miserable it would make the other person for me to be angry with them, and I was unaware that it was painful right here, right now. Wisdom creates a shift of perspective that allows us to recognize that reactive emotions, states of mind based in greed and aversion, and delusion, are suffering in the moment. Wisdom at work.

We might notice a sense of self arising based on causes and conditions: A sense of self might arise out of a thought, an image, or a change in our external environment. For example, you might be doing walking meditation in solitude and then somebody walks in to the room. That shift of conditions can create the sense of self arising: the feeling of being seen and observed by another is a powerful condition for the arising of a sense of self! Noticing the arising of the sense of self as dependent on conditions is wisdom at work. Wisdom understanding the sense of self as a conditioned phenomenon.

We might recognize that our reactivity is not related to something in our external environment, but is actually reacting to a construct in our own minds, an idea. We can see that we are reacting to something our own mind has constructing, and the mind sees how useless that is. Wisdom starts to let go of that reactivity; there is a feeling of release. Again, wisdom at work.

Wisdom often has a flavor of releasing some form of suffering. When we feel those shifts, when we feel the recognition of a sense of release that is wisdom at work.

The experience of release is a kind of feedback for why it is helpful to cultivate wisdom, why it is helpful to do this practice. We understand: *this is a way that the heart and mind be can more at ease, at peace, have more well-being.* This understanding is not abstract, but is experienced now, right now. We cultivate the conditions for wisdom to arise with this really simple practice. Are you aware?

Rather than looking for wisdom, be available for it. Let it show itself. We become available for wisdom to arise through the cultivation of the continuity, the stability of awareness. As awareness stabilizes there's less of a need to ask what awareness is aware of. Awareness in this settling into the continuity of awareness. Awareness knows what it's aware of. Aware? Are you aware? Allowing that simplicity to support the conditions for wisdom to arise.

Evening Reflection: Nothing to Do or Undo

Opening to just what is offered in this moment. Aware? Aware? Allowing a patient, friendly connection with experience to support understanding. Relax and learn.

Our minds and bodies are natural learners if we let them, and if we can be available. Learning to be available to what is offered takes some training. Sometimes it is possible. Sometimes it's not. Sometimes we have to use our tools and set aside our struggles. If an experience is overwhelming, we may choose set aside what's offered in favor of something chosen as neutral.

This is wisdom at work too. We all have powerful forces at work in our minds. Delusion, greed and aversion are powerful, and sometimes we aren't able to simply observe them as objects. Sometimes we need take an action and choose another object.

Yet, sometimes awareness can become strong, and we are available to receive what's offered. Receive just this experience: watch it arise, watch it pass away; see change happening. Watch the flow of experience. Settle back and watch life live itself through this organism. It's amazing!

I thought I'd share a Tibetan poem, *Spontaneous Vajra Song*, by Lama Gendun Rinpoche. It has been meaningful for my own practice. I On a recent retreat, I memorized it, and found phrases from the poem arising, as instructions, at times during the day.

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower,
but is already present, in open relaxation and letting go.
Don't strain yourself, there is nothing to do or undo.

Whatever momentarily arises in the body-mind
has no real importance at all, has little reality whatsoever.
Why identify with, and become attached to it,
passing judgment upon it and ourselves?

Far better to let the entire game happen on its own,
 springing up and falling back like waves,
 without changing or manipulating anything,
 and notice how everything vanishes and reappears, magically,
 again and again, time without end.

Only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it.
 It's like a vivid rainbow which you pursue without ever catching,
 or a dog chasing its own tail.

Although peace and happiness do not exist as an actual thing or place,
 it is always available and accompanies you every instant.
 Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences;
 they are like today's ephemeral weather, like rainbows in the sky.

Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain.
 As soon as you open and relax this tight fist of grasping,
 infinite space is there - open, inviting, comfortable.

Make use of this spaciousness, this freedom and natural ease.
 Don't search any further looking for the great awakened elephant,
 who is already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth.

Nothing to do or undo,
 nothing to force,
 nothing to want,
 and nothing missing.
 Amazing! Everything happens by itself.

The phrase "Nothing to undo" was very powerful for me on my retreat. It reminded me that what ever is arising is simply what is offered; not a problem or something to change. Just something simply to be known.

“Nothing to do or undo, nothing to force, nothing to want, and nothing missing.”

Day 7

What Kind of Effort is Helpful

What is the mind doing, right now? Is it thinking? Is it being aware? Is it searching? Is there ease or struggle? Whatever is happening in the mind, it can be known. Is it noticing body experience? Is it noticing feelings, emotions? Any experience, every experience can be known. No experience any more or less useful for wisdom to arise than any other.

We practice awareness with whatever arises. Sometimes we experience an easeful kind of awareness, continuity and momentum, when less personal effort needed. It can feel almost like awareness is doing itself. We like this. We can easily get attached to this easeful experience of awareness simply happening, and if we're attached to it, we might resist making the personal effort when it would actually be helpful.

Different kinds of effort may be called for at different times. Sometimes we can settle back and let awareness do its thing, but often some level of personal effort is needed. The most basic kind of personal effort is just reminding ourselves: *Am I aware? What's Obvious?* This kind of effort is helpful when the mind is not so settled, when it is agitated or pulled away in thoughts or ideas. We also might even intentionally connect to a particular experience such as to breath or body sensation, just to ground the attention if it's really scattered, if it's not connecting easily with experience.

This is our basic practice, reminding ourselves to be aware. The level of effort is connected to how frequently we remind ourselves. We can tune this level of effort also: a slightly lighter touch to the effort is simply checking in: *Aware? Is there awareness already? Aware.* Not trying to do anything additional about connecting to objects in particular, but trusting that they are already known in awareness. Sometimes this level of effort is sufficient. *Aware? Perhaps: already aware,* as a simple recognition of awareness that is already happening.

Another support for effort is engaging the sense of curiosity, by using questions. *What am I missing? What else is here? What purpose is this thing that is arising serving?* When the mind is curious about experience, the awareness can be less effortful, because the curiosity naturally motivates effort.

Sometimes we simply can remind ourselves of wisdom, acknowledging the wisdom that may be relevant for whatever's happening. *This is impermanent. This is dukkha. It's just an experience, it's just an object. These are just conditions unfolding. This is nature.* When we reminding ourselves of the wisdom, sometimes a natural effort arises, a more easeful effort. Sometime effort comes along for the ride as we touch into wisdom.

Sometimes wisdom combined with confidence supports effort. When we are confident that it is possible to meet anything that arises, this can also support a natural, easeful effort. And even when the mind feels scattered, confused, searching or exhausted or frustrated, if there's a moment of not resisting that truth of the moment's experience, the mind can relax and a natural effort again can arise supported by confidence and wisdom.

Sometimes we think we have to make the effort for wisdom to arise. It sometimes happens that way, but other times when we stop resisting the truth, when the mind can fully recognize: *This is what's actually happening*, the mind can relax and understand more naturally. Resistance to experience ties up our energy, and when the resistance releases energy is freed up, and a very natural continuity can happen, if even only for a few moments.

What kind of effort is helpful? Is personal effort helpful right now? Reminding ourselves to be aware? Is curiosity helpful right now? Is wisdom helpful right now? Understanding the level of effort that is appropriate requires honesty with ourselves, because we do prefer some kinds of effort over others. Honestly opening to experience right now, not resisting the truth of this moment's experience, and not resisting the truth of the level of effort that would be most helpful.

Evening Reflection: Simple Awareness Receives Complex Experience

Connecting with awareness. Each of you with your own experience. This experience of body, of mind. The simplicity of simply allowing awareness to meet experience.

That allowing is a kind of a getting out of the way. Awareness knows how to be aware, doesn't actually need our involvement.

At times when awareness is available, and is meeting experience, and there's the capacity to be curious, allowing awareness to meet experience, that is enough. There's nothing more we need to look for, to find or see; just what is already available in awareness. That's enough.

Very naturally as we connect to this awareness, as we practice being with ourselves, the momentum of awareness will grow. That continuity of mindfulness, the momentum of mindfulness will reveal new things.

It sometimes reveals more subtle experience; sometimes just ordinary experience; sometimes, when we're available, it can reveal experiences we are really unfamiliar with.

That can bring up discomfort. Noticing discomfort. What's the relationship to discomfort? What's the relationship to the unfamiliar?

There's a trust that grows as we practice in this way.

Once we allow awareness to do its own job, we begin to trust that this is enough: this combination of the wisdom, of the curiosity of meeting experience with the awareness.

Awareness. This process of being aware: this is so simple. So simple.

What this simple awareness meets, and can know is awesomely complex: the workings of our mind. How processes conditioned each other. Sometimes the momentary nature of experience and how quickly things are changing.

But, the practice itself is simple. Aware? Letting awareness receive whatever is here with an interest in experience as experience, as a happening in the moment.

Sometimes this can feel very easeful, simple, flowing. Even as we're seeing so many different things. Sometimes our minds open to the vast complexity of what's going on in our minds: feelings, thoughts, perceptions, sensations all being processed. We can feel flooded by the complexity of experience.

Some of being flooded is just becoming aware of the complexity of our minds. Notice the relationship. Maybe there's a feeling of overwhelmed by the complexity. How are you? What is their relationship: aversion fear, confusion, uncertainty? Awe?

The practice is so simple. Mindfulness, this wise mindfulness can know this complexity, can meet this complexity when the mindfulness is simple.

Our practice, to some extent is a cultivation of the trust in that simplicity. Aware. Maybe you're already aware.

Recognizing *already aware*, sometimes that's all that we have to do: just, *there's awareness here*. No need for particular questions or investigations, just trusting the simplicity of that awareness, which may already be imbued with enough curiosity to meet whatever is here.

Day 8

What is the Nature of...

Relax... Relax and see if a simple awareness is available. Sometimes relaxation can support a more effortless quality of awareness. Noticing awareness. *Aware? Already Aware.*

Awareness naturally knows what it is aware of. This is the nature of awareness. So we can settle back and simply cultivate the capacity of awareness. Relax and allow awareness; sometimes it's that simple. Then, awareness observes the processes of body and mind. Our intention is to understand, observe and to learn. We learn about the nature of our mind and body, and learn about how they affect each other. As awareness stabilizes and becomes more continuous, learning begins to happen very naturally.

If reactivity arises, we learn about the nature of reactivity. For example, how does aversion affect our bodies, our thoughts, our emotions? As awareness strengthens and becomes more continuous, we can recognize these effects. and it becomes easier to see how patterns inter-relate, how they function, how they condition each other.

We also might be curious about the nature of aversion, not simply how it feels in the body, but what is its function in the mind? The basic nature of aversion is to separate, to believe that separation will bring happiness, or at least some measure of release. Aversion orients the mind to look for things to separate from. Sayadaw says this is just aversion doing its job, he encourages us to get to know the “job description” of the qualities in our minds. We could say that the work of awareness and wisdom, as it meets aversion, is to get to know the job description of aversion really well! What is the nature of love? The nature of love seems to be to connect, recognizing it doesn't need connection in return. This is the job description of love.

There are many processes at work in the mind and body: the process of feeling, the process of recognizing, perceiving experience, the process of volition, the process of knowing. As mindfulness stabilizes and reactivity diminishes, we can explore the nature of these processes of the mind. We get to know the nature of the feeling process. Feeling feels. What does it feel? It feels pleasant; it feels unpleasant; it feels neutral. That's the job of feeling. Each function of mind doing its own job. Feeling feels, no one doing that feeling, no feeler, just the process of feeling, arising from causes and conditions and doing its job.

Anger angers. Just the process of anger arising due to causes and conditions and doing its job. No one angry, no being that is angry. Knowing knows. No knower. Wisdom understands. The job of wisdom is to understand experience, to understand relationships, understand the causal nature, understand impermanence, understand unreliability. The job of wisdom is to understand and release dukkha.

The simplicity of the practice creates the conditions for understanding to grow. We don't have to be in charge. We can't be in charge, really. The perspective of awareness that we've been practicing, of being curious about our human experience, will create the conditions for the growth of wisdom and the release of suffering. So opening to patience: relax, observe, allow, and learn.

Observing Change

As the momentum of practice builds, we can sometimes find, to our surprise, that we're already aware, and that it doesn't take conscious, personal effort to be aware, to know that we are aware and know the experience. And yet our habit of personal effort can be very subtle. A subtle, habitual, trying to do the awareness.

Is awareness already present? Already aware. We can simply be with the experience of awareness and knowing the objects of awareness. Life revealing itself to us. The mind revealing itself to us.

Very naturally we begin to learn about our minds, the processes of mind. We get to know something of the nature of our experience. We get to know the nature of our reactivity. We get familiar with their job descriptions. We get familiar with the qualities of the various types of experience and how they are different. Smell is very different from sight, different from body sensation.

All this learning happens with just the willingness to receive, this moment, things as they are. Right now. Experience revealing its specific nature, with patient, simple relaxed observing. Allowing what arises with a loving awareness a kind attention. No need for anything to be different than it is. Whatever is arising is where the Dharma reveals itself.

As a familiarity grows around the specific qualities of our experience, we may also start to recognize that experiences share some qualities in common, these are the general qualities of our experience.

One of the clearest of these general qualities is the changing nature of experience. Every single experience arises and passes away.

We get to know as feelings as they arise, as they persist, as they pass away. Thoughts as they arise, as they linger, as they pass away. Perceptions as they arise, as they linger, as they pass away.

At times awareness might tune into the changing nature of experience, and become more interested in change than in the specific qualities of experience.

We might recognize or understand the changing nature of experience in different ways at different times. It might simply be recognized as flow of experience, one experience flowing into another. Something new may be present before we've fully noticed the last thing that was there. There can be a feeling of a tumbling flow of change.

We might have a sense of discrete appearances and disappearances. Or perhaps the mind is more interested in things as they arise, or as they pass away.

If the awareness has become curious about change, there is no need to try to know something specific about each experience. We can just tune in to the way change is being recognized in this moment.

There is also no need to avoid or push away the recognition of specific experience if that is what is naturally being known or understood. Sometimes these two can happen together. We know both the changing nature and the specific experience.

Settling back, are you already aware? Allowing awareness to receive the experience of life as it presents itself in this moment. Being open to the way the mind is interested in observing experience right now. Witnessing this organism living itself.

How amazing that these processes do their own work, and how amazing that it can be witnessed and understood.

Noticing when change stops

If awareness is curious about the changing nature of experience, you might at times notice that the flow of change seems to stop, almost like there is a wrench in the works. At that point, rather than trying to get back to the flow of change, be curious about the stopping itself. What is that experience?

Is something being solidified around? What is this experience of solidity?

Or perhaps, what is just the simple experience of stopping? Know that. Just notice that. What is this?

Every moment the instruction is the same: What is this? What is this?

Evening Reflection: No Part Left Out

Relax. With relaxation is there already some awareness? Are you already aware? Relax. Observe. Allow. With an allowing awareness, nothing is excluded. We open to the entirety of our human experience. Often, we have a deep wish to really be seen; we want to belong. With this allowing attitude in our practice, we can deeply see ourselves. We learn to belong to ourselves.

We learn to not fear parts of ourselves, not reject parts of ourselves, recognizing that with awareness and wisdom everything is allowable and it can all transform. As we sit and observe, and are aware of the movements in our hearts, the processes of our minds, we are actually learning how to love ourselves.

If someone else were willing to be fully accepting of you, to not judge, reject or deny any part of you, just their willingness to be present might be felt as a very healing. This kind of allowing awareness is possible for each of us to do for ourselves in a very deep way.

Another word related to “allowing” is *acceptance*. But we need to understand acceptance doesn’t mean that we have to like something! In the book “Buddha Recognizes Buddha,” the Zen teacher Daishin Morgan wrote about acceptance, exploring a different perspective on the word:

"To accept means to receive what is offered. Circumstances of life give rise to conditions, and our acceptance of these conditions is just the acceptance of things as they are. What is not meant

by the idea of acceptance is any agreement or disagreement with the way things are. Acceptance is about basing ourselves in reality, not about making judgments of liking and disliking, or of agreeing and disagreeing. To accept the situation is to be grounded in the actual state of things, without getting lost in ideals or fantasies of how we would like it to be. We then have a good basis from which to see what action may be called for. Acceptance does not imply inertia. On the contrary, to be grounded in reality gives rise to a true response".

Our practice of opening to just what's here, being with what is offered, cultivates this quality of acceptance or allowing. We open to ourselves fully. A poem by Izumi Shikibu:

*Watching the moon at dawn,
solitary mid sky,
I knew myself completely,
no part left out.*

Day 9

Rhythms of Practice

Keeping the practice simple. The simplicity of just recognizing awareness: Are you aware? The simplicity of just receiving experience: What is obvious?

This simplicity of practice allows wisdom to grow. Sayadaw says: "A complicated mind, one that thinks, expects, and plans, blocks off wisdom." The mind must be simple in order to be present, to see things just as they are.

As we cultivate the simplicity of just receiving experience, we may see ways in which our mind complicates things. If experience seems complicated it is just something to know. If experience is complicated, it's an object!

At times we might notice complications related to expectations about practice. Beliefs such as: *"Things are supposed to be more concentrated. Things are supposed to be more continuous, more interesting, more blissful. There is supposed to be more insight, fewer thoughts. Experience is supposed to be more clear."* There are so many different ways we think practice should be like.

Our expectations are often related to ideas we have about practice. Ideas about how the practice is supposed to unfold. Ideas about what experience should be like as mindfulness gets more continuous. *"I have been practicing for a long time, so I should not be experiencing so much reactivity."* Expectations are themselves worth recognizing as experience, are worth unmasking as views that we hold. We can notice: *"Believing experience should be more clear is happening right now. Believing experience should be more interesting is happening right now."*

Beliefs or expectations can lead to reactions: frustration, doubt, depression, feeling of failure, over-efforting, giving up. All of these can be responses to expectations not being met. In some ways having unmet expectations is helpful because if the expectations were met, you would not notice that you had the expectations.

While we have ideas about how practice is supposed to unfold, our practice has its own rhythms. It's not uncommon after a period of continuity, of ease and settled-ness, for waves of reactivity or thoughts to happen. This is a natural part of the rhythm of practice. What is happening in this

moment is the unfolding of your practice. Trust that meeting whatever is unfolding *is* the practice.

Are you aware? What is awareness aware of? Sometimes awareness does not know what it is aware of, or we are not able to recognize what awareness knows. That is okay. This also is a part of the unfolding of practice: some experiences are unfamiliar, and we do not recognize them. We know we are aware, but do not know what awareness is aware of. Check in: Aware? Is there awareness? If you don't know what the object is, you can just recognize: "*Not-knowing is happening.*" And yet, awareness is happening.

Sometimes we confuse the experience with how the practice is going. If the experience is pleasant, we think it is going well. If the experience is unpleasant, we might think it is not going so well. Awareness itself is not impacted, is not changed by what it is aware of. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral: it is just another experience.

We might think if the objects are clear, if we know exactly what we are experiencing, that is good practice: "*Surely, the longer I practice the more clear the experience becomes.*" Not necessarily. Sometimes the unclarity of objects happens when the practice is deepening. It can sometimes even feel like awareness itself is vanishing.

Also, we might think that as practice deepens things will be seen in a subtler way, and that would indicate good practice. We might think that if experience feels just really ordinary: "*Surely, I must be doing something wrong.*" If ordinary experience is what is happening, check the awareness: Are you aware? Sometimes the mind is simply understanding how it meets the ordinary objects and experiences of life.

If you are noticing an idea or reaction to the practice itself: "*Should be some other way. Should not be this way. I must be doing it wrong,*" then you might recognize these as beliefs arising in the moment: "*Belief is arising.*" That too can be known.

What is happening right now? Are you aware? Can you open to the experience as it is? As it is offered? Including waves of reactivity, including diffuse or unknown experience, including ordinary experience. The mind will go through countless shifts during the day. The unfolding of those shifts, experiencing awareness—that is where the practice unfolds. Nowhere else.

Evolving Trust in Practice

We have no idea how our practice is supposed to unfold, and yet we have so many opinions about it. Sayadaw sometimes says our practice is about *taking care of the awareness*. One way we can take care of awareness is by recognizing the experience of awareness itself. Knowing that we are aware and recognizing the difference when awareness gets caught in something; when awareness is caught, awareness and wisdom are not working together. A very simple awareness allows wisdom to arise and to be cultivated. If we are looking for something, the very act of looking might obscure what is there. Just as we explore seeing and looking in the sense door of sight, and hearing and listening in the sense door of sound, there is a kind of a similar distinction between receiving experience and searching for something to know in awareness.

As the practice unfolds, I think *taking care of the awareness* means allowing more receiving, which can require trust. We have to trust that awareness can receive what is there, even if the experience is confusing or if it is not clear. We can just know *confusing* or *not clear*. The mind can be very clear that experience is unclear! It is a funny kind of clarity. We need to trust the teachings themselves. Learning to trust that the tools that are offered are helpful. Learning to trust that when awareness really meets a defilement, that it is no longer acting as a defilement! This journey of practice feels like a deepening of trust.

Initially we make what Sayadaw calls *personal effort* to do the practice. With discernment, we know when we need to make a choice to engage with personal effort: , "*This reactivity is way stronger than mindfulness, so I need to step aside. I need to look at something else, take a walk, have a cup of tea, sit and look at the trees.*" So we learn deepening levels of trust, and at some point, we really have to trust in the letting go. We have to trust that wisdom knows where the practice is going and we are not in charge of wisdom. There is an evolution of trust over the course of the practice. With discernment we begin to learn when to simply let go and trust *Nothing to do or undo*, and when to trust the understanding *Time to do*. When it is time to bring in personal effort and be more active in our practice.

Over the course of practice we learn our own rhythms of practice, we learn what is appropriate for us, and yet at some point we just have to let go and get out of the way. This may happen for brief periods of time in our practice. Perhaps for a short time the mind recognizes that we have no idea of what is supposed to happen, we have no idea about what the next experience is going to be. If you think you know what the next moment is going to bring, there is a concept

operating, a belief in a concept. At a very profound and real level we have no idea about what the next moment will bring. At some point, we open to trust stepping into the unknown. It takes a deep courage and a letting go to open to that level of trust.

Evening Reflection: When we Stop Resisting the Truth the Mind can Relax

What is the truth of what is happening right now? This practice asks for a radical honesty. Awareness and wisdom demand honesty. Sometimes when we can open to the honest truth of what is happening, especially if we have been resisting it, this connection to the truth frees up the awareness to just connect to what is happening and realize that nothing else needs to happen in this moment. *It's like this.*

We can let ourselves acknowledge whatever in the present moment is really hard right now... frustration is happening... or perhaps peace or bliss ... or maybe exhaustion...

When we connect with the truth, sometimes the mind can relax. Nothing needs to change, “nothing to do or undo”. Frustrated mind being frustrated: Frustration is like this... Exhausted mind being exhausted. Exhaustion being known. Easeful mind is like this. Planning mind is like this.

Toward the end of retreat as the mind shifts gears into future thinking, we sometimes forget just how simple the practice is. Maybe the experience of the “shift of gears” is just what is asking to be seen and met with honesty, met with awareness and wisdom.

If the mind feels like it is struggling, might it be possible to just recognize *struggling is like this?* Or maybe simply: *struggling is known...* The practice remains simple, even in the transition of the end of retreat. We may need to make some personal effort again: gently reminding ourselves to be aware. Yet there is nothing that needs to change within experience, we are cultivating awareness with whatever is happening.

Aware? Perhaps, Already Aware?

At the end of a long day of practice, you might find that the mind is tired, and that remembering awareness feels like too much effort. Sometimes I find, at this time of day, that just aligning myself with what is true can be supportive. Tired. That is true.

An acknowledgment of what is true in the moment can support a natural awareness. We are no longer fighting to do anything other than what is already happening. And as the mind releases any resistance, some of the awareness is freed to simply be available for the truth.

When we stop resisting the truth, the mind can relax.