NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

# Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein

*Satipaṭṭhāna and the Buddha's discourses, from a founding IMS teacher (2016 onward)*

**Joseph Goldstein**

SOURCED FROM DHARMASEED.ORG

# Contents


## MAY 2016 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Q&A | 56 min | 0 |
| Right Speech | 55 min | 0 |

## PEOPLE OF COLOR RETREAT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Doubt and Aversion | 59 min | 0 |
| Liberation through Non-Clinging | 1h02 | 0 |

## JULY INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Working with Afflictive Emotions | 59 min | 0 |
| Reflections on Non-Self | 58 min | 0 |
| Deepening Insight into Impermanence | 1h02 | 0 |
| Collage (Retreat at Spirit Rock) | 56 min | 0 |
| What Mindfulness Is and What It Isn't | 58 min | 0 |
| Equanimity and Compassion in Challenging Times | 1h02 | 0 |
| Day 8 Morning Sit (Retreat at Spirit Rock) | 1h21 | 0 |
| The Map of Wisdom, Part One | 1h05 | 0 |
| Map of Wisdom, Part 2 (Retreat at Spirit Rock) | 1h09 | 0 |
| Saturday's Short Sitting & Dhamma Talk: The Power of Upekkhā | 1h15 | 0 |
| Sunday's Dedicated Questions & Responses with Joseph | 1h29 | 0 |
| Monday's Questions & Responses | 31 min | 0 |
| Working with Thoughts and Emotions | 1h02 | 0 |
| Bodhicitta: Compassion and Emptiness | 1h06 | 0 |

## THREE-MONTH PART 1

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Working with Thoughts and Emotions | 59 min | 0 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Q&A | 1h04 | 0 |
| Creating a Concept of Self – Part One | 57 min | 0 |
| Cutting Through Identification with Consciousness | 53 min | 0 |
| Big Mind Meditation | 41 min | 0 |
| Q & A | 1h08 | 0 |

## APRIL 2017 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Understanding Doubt and Aversion | 59 min | 0 |
| Morning Reflection | 18 min | 0 |
| The Radical Truth of Impermanence | 53 min | 0 |
| Morning Reflection | 14 min | 0 |
| No Foothold | 57 min | 0 |
| The Nature of Mind: Intrinsically Empty, Naturally Radiant, Ceaselessly Responsive | 57 min | 0 |

## TNI REGULAR TALKS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Compassion and Equanimity in Difficult Times | 1h53 | 0 |
| Compassion & Equanimity in Difficult Times, Daylong Retreat: Afternoon | 1h06 | 0 |
| Compassion and Equanimity in Difficult Times, Daylong Retreat: Morning | 2h10 | 0 |

## THREE-MONTH RETREAT - PART 2

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Questions and Answers | 1h09 | 0 |
| Questions and Answers | 1h07 | 0 |
| Q&A | 1h06 | 0 |
| Q&A with Joseph Goldstein | 1h08 | 0 |

## EMBODYING THE HEART OF WISDOM: NEW YEAR'S RETREAT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Q&A | 1h00 | 0 |

## THE PATH TO AWAKENING: INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| What Is Mindfulness? | 1h03 | 0 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Mettā Meditation | 1h07 | 0 |
| Mindfulness: The Methodology of Wisdom | 1h04 | 0 |
| Dukkha and Non-Self | 1h19 | 0 |
| Cutting Through the Identification with Consciousness, the Knowing Mind | 58 min | 0 |
| Desire and Its End | 58 min | 0 |
| Reflections on Non-Self (Anattā) | 1h04 | 0 |
| Q&A | 58 min | 0 |
| Nuances of Right Effort | 1h19 | 0 |
| Working with Thoughts | 1h04 | 0 |
| Q&A: Integrating Practice, Right Speech, and Love No Matter What | 1h03 | 0 |

### THREE-MONTH RETREAT - PART 1

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Q&A | 1h04 | 0 |
| Q&A with Joseph Goldstein | 1h12 | 0 |
| Joseph's Responses to Three-Month Yogis' Written Questions | 1h05 | 0 |

### JULY INSIGHT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Enlightenment or Bust (Retreat at Spirit Rock) | 57 min | 0 |
| Dukkha and Non-Self (Retreat at Spirit Rock) | 1h03 | 0 |

### NOVEMBER 2019 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Q&A | 1h05 | 0 |

### GAIA HOUSE FUNDRAISING EVENT - WITH JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Online Fundraising Event for Gaia House, with Joseph Goldstein | 1h28 | 0 |

### DHARMA TRANSMISSION: A CONVERSATION WITH JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN AND DAWN SCOTT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dharma Transmission: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein and Dawn Scott | 1h29 | 0 |

### INSIGHT MEDITATION AND THE FORCES AT PLAY IN OUR LIVES - 21JG0

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Papañca, Part 1 | 1h33 | 0 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Opening Session | 1h35 | 0 |
| Questions & Responses | 1h33 | 0 |
| Papañca, Part 2 | 1h28 | 0 |
| Questions & Responses | 1h34 | 0 |

## "JULY INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT" WITH KAMALA MASTERS, JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN, BRUNI DÁVILA, SHELLY GRAF AND WALT OPIE

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Papañca 1: Craving, Conceit, and Wrong View | 1h16 | 0 |
| Questions & Answers about Papañca 1 | 1h22 | 0 |
| Papañca 2: Craving, Conceit, and Wrong View | 1h12 | 0 |
| Questions & Answers about Papañca 2 | 1h09 | 0 |

## SECOND 3-WEEK INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Questions and Responses | 1h05 | 0 |

## EXPLORING NIBBANA: A CONVERSATION WITH JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Exploring Nibbāna: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein | 1h31 | 0 |

## THE MAP OF WISDOM: A CONVERSATION WITH JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN ON THE CORE BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| The Map of Wisdom: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein on the Core Buddhist Teachings | 1h32 | 0 |

## THE PATH TO AWAKENING

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Liberation Teachings for Daily Life | 1h10 | 0 |
| Questions and Responses | 1h02 | 0 |
| Understanding Karma | 1h11 | 0 |

## DECEMBER 2024

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Q&R | 1h03 | 0 |

## APRIL INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Why Meditate | 1h01 | 0 |

### COMING HOME TO KIND AWARENESS: INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT – 25BVM

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Q & A | 1h11 | 0 |

### THREE-MONTH RETREAT – PART 1 - 25PT1

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Questions and Responses | 1h08 | 0 |

### DECEMBER 2025 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Questions and Answers with Joseph Goldstein | 1h01 | 0 |

### LIBERATION: A DIALOGUE ACROSS BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Opening Session | 1h24 | 0 |
| Session with Joseph Goldstein: Non-Clinging, Māna, and the Unborn | 2h36 | 0 |
| Closing Session | 2h22 | 0 |

### STANDALONE TALKS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dreaming Ourselves Into Existence: Dukkha, Non-Self, and Waking Up | 1h34 | 0 |
| Ask Joseph: Group Mentorship Program | 1h30 | 0 |
| Ask Joseph: A Group Mentorship Program | 1h49 | 0 |

CHAPTER 1

# Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 56 min

---

> *In this wide-ranging Q&A session from the Forest Refuge, Joseph Goldstein addresses fundamental questions about meditation practice and Buddhist philosophy. He begins by exploring whether Theravāda Buddhism has an equivalent to the Mahāyāna concept of Buddha nature, citing the Buddha's teaching that the mind is inherently luminous (pabhassara citta) but obscured by visiting defilements—suggesting that unwholesome states are not intrinsic to awareness itself but temporary visitors.*
>
> *Goldstein offers detailed guidance on the relationship between samatha and vipassanā practice, drawing from his own experience as a student of Munindra-ji and Dīpa Mā. He distinguishes between momentary concentration (khaṇika samādhi) developed in vipassanā and the one-pointed absorption (jhāna) cultivated through samatha, explaining how these approaches support each other rather than conflict. Personal stories illuminate how mettā practice helped develop the concentration his philosophical mind initially lacked.*
>
> *The talk also addresses practical questions about working with mind states: when precision in naming emotions matters versus when simple awareness suffices, how mettā benefits both practitioner and recipients, and the crucial distinction between the third and fourth foundations of mindfulness (cittānupassanā and dhammānupassanā) in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Goldstein emphasizes investigating the conditions that give rise to hindrances and those that remove them, offering concrete examples of how mindfulness at sense doors can prevent the arising of unwholesome states.*

There were a lot of questions submitted, and I probably won't have time to get to all of them tonight. What's interesting about doing these question and answer sessions is that there's a really nice range of questions and interesting topics, so I'll cover many different things.

The first question was: Is there anything similar to Buddha nature in Theravada Buddhism? The term "Buddha nature" appears quite commonly in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. The questioner writes, "I find the idea a helpful antidote to striving. That is, Buddha nature is already here. It's not something we have to get, but rather recognize and come back to." So what is there in the Theravada teachings that might have some similarity to this?

The Buddha talked about the nature of mind in a particular way in the Pali texts, and while it may not be identical to what's meant in the Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings, it points to a quality of the mind that has the same effect when we realize it in terms of helping us let go of striving.

This is from one of the suttas where the Buddha says, "Luminous is this mind, or shining is this mind, but it is obscured by visiting defilements. An uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this as it really is, so for them there is no development of mind. Luminous is this mind, and it is freed from visiting defilements. An instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is, so for them there is development of mind."

What does this suggest? The Buddha is saying quite clearly that the mind is inherently luminous or radiant, which does not refer so much to the quality of light—what we might normally think of as luminosity—but rather refers to its knowing capacity. The mind is luminous; it inherently knows. It's defiled by visiting defilements. The Buddha is saying that the defilements in the mind are not inherent in the mind; they are visitors.

This is helpful to know as we come face to face with different defilements or unskillful states. To know that they are visitors means they don't belong to us in any way. They come just as visitors when the conditions are there, and they pass away. They're not inherent. So we can recognize and come back to this—we could call it the bare quality of knowing, the bare quality of that luminosity.

I had an interesting experience of this which really helped me understand a way of being with things in a non-reactive fashion. This happened some years ago in January when I took a week's vacation down in the Caribbean. Beautiful. Almost all day long I was going around saying "pleasant, pleasant, pleasant." The sights were pleasant, the scents were pleasant, the warm breeze on the skin was pleasant. A week of pleasant.

Then I came back to Barre in the middle of January. It was freezing cold, a particularly cold, freezing, icy wind. Walking outside, the wind would just be burning the skin. It was so cold. Unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant.

The contrast was so strong that something became very apparent: the knowing mind was the same. The knowing mind was not affected by the pleasant or unpleasant. The mind simply had the nature to know. That was the function of the mind—to know. Sometimes it knows what's pleasant, sometimes it knows what's unpleasant, but the knowing quality was exactly the same, whether it was down in the Caribbean or here in the freezing cold. It was just so striking to realize this again.

Whether we call that Buddha nature or not—and in the other traditions it may have other specific meanings—right within the Theravada tradition we can understand this fundamental nature of mind, the fundamental nature of consciousness, of awareness, which simply knows. We can always come back to that, remembering that the defilements which may come are visitors. They come and may cloud the knowing from time to time, but they are not inherent to it. They are not intrinsic to it. They are not a part of it.

This can be a very helpful place to come back to again and again—to rest simply in the knowing of what's arising, realizing that at times it will be pleasant, at times it will be unpleasant, but the knowing function is not affected by that. The knowing function is exactly the same.

Also, I heard that Sayadaw U Pandita taught samatha to people after they already had some insight. Why was this? And Dipa Ma asked you to sit for two days in meditation. I tell this story sometimes. She looked at me and said, "Sit for two days." And she didn't mean a weekend retreat. She meant sit down and get up two days later. Did you do it? Please tell something about that. If someone wants to practice like that, what should they do? Can you talk a little about the relationship of mindfulness and concentration?

So this is a question about these two different kinds of practice. The first thing to keep in mind is that concentration—often a translation of the Pali word samadhi—takes different forms. Basically, samadhi means undistractedness or steadiness. The example they use in the texts is of a candle burning in a place without any wind: the flame stays very steady, not flickering. That's what concentration means—steadiness of mind. The mind is not wavering, not flickering.

This can take different forms. In vipassana practice, the kind of samadhi that's developed is called momentary concentration, because we're developing a mind that's steady on changing objects. It could be on the breath, then sensation, then sound, then thought. Moment after moment the object may be changing, but the samadhi can develop if it's steady moment to moment, if it's not getting distracted or lost in thought. The noting here is a good check of whether our mind is steady moment to moment. If we can acknowledge: in, out, hearing, seeing, pressure, pressure—the objects are changing, but the mind is steady on each object in the moment. This is called momentary concentration.

It can get very strong. It can develop so that there is a very strong momentum of this concentration along with the mindfulness which is observing the object. Mindfulness is the observing power; concentration is the steadiness power. When they're working to-

gether, it can get very strong, until there's a very continuous momentum. Some of you may have experienced this in your vipassana practice. There are times when this momentary samadhi has a strong momentum, and one can sit for hours. The mind is noting and noticing and observing moment after moment, with very few distractions. We have built up this momentary samadhi in that case.

The other kind of samadhi—the practice usually referred to as samatha practice—is where we take a single object. The mind is not on changing objects; it takes just a single object. It could be the breath. It could be a visual image. In the tradition they talk of using kasinas, colored discs. It could be the brahmaviharas. This is a samatha practice where we focus just on a single object or theme. Here the goal is not so much seeing the momentariness of phenomena; here the goal is staying steady on a single object, the end result being absorption in that experience, where one is not aware of anything else, one is totally absorbed.

It's this kind of concentration, this one-pointed concentration through samatha, which is the basis for all the different psychic powers that you read about—the powers that the great yogis have mastered. One of the questions referred to Dipa Ma, one of our teachers in India, who had extraordinary attainment and realization, both in vipassana and the stages of awakening, and also in samatha and absorption. She could sit for days. She once sat for three days in an absorbed state, where the mind was not wavering at all, was completely absorbed in the object.

When she asked me to sit for two days—not asked me, she told me to sit for two days—I think she was thinking about herself and not me. Because my response was to laugh, as you just did. And all she said to that was, "Don't be lazy." I think there's a little more than laziness involved, although that might have been part of it. It takes a very strong development of that particular function of the mind.

And it can be practiced. Over my many years of practice, I've taken periods of time when I would do just a samatha practice. When I first went to India, I got interested in Buddhism when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand and was just introduced to a very simple practice, but I was very new to it. When I finished my time in the Peace Corps, I realized I wanted to continue and needed a teacher, so I went back to India after coming home for a couple of months.

And after traveling around, I met Munindraji, my first Dharma teacher. A couple of things happened which are of interest perhaps to this question of Vipassana and Samatha.

When I first sat down—and again, I was very new to the practice, I didn't really know much about the practice or the teachings—I just had a little bit of light appear in my mind. Munindraji, having just trained Dipa Ma in Burma, thought, "Oh, here's another yogi. We'll have him do Samatha practice." So he said, "Okay, concentrate on the light."

I started practicing on just seeing the light—light, light, light. I drove myself crazy. I was very new to the practice, really had no idea about how to work with anything, didn't know about the hindrances. All I knew was that there was this little bit of light and I was supposed to focus on it. There was so much striving, so much struggle, so much distress—unlike Dipa Ma.

After not a long time, Munindraji realized this was not the right practice for me to be doing at this time. So he said, "Okay, let's just go back to the Vipassana," you know, the rising, falling, and the instructions that you're all familiar with. It was very helpful, because then instead of struggling to be with just this one object and not knowing what to do about everything else that arose, I settled back and relaxed. I was just with the breath and different sensations and thoughts—but still it was very difficult.

There may be some of you who have a very natural ability for samādhi. There are some people like that who kind of sit down and their minds are naturally concentrated. The practice is easier when people have already developed this. For me, I had zero concentration. I had studied philosophy in college. My mind loved to think, and so when I first began meditation, I would just sit and think for an hour—and enjoyed it. This is a very nice way to spend an hour.

It took a lot of perseverance just to keep going, because it was difficult. When the mind is not concentrated, the body can get uncomfortable and the mind can get restless—all the hindrances. But I was very committed. I just kept doing it and kept doing it.

At some point I realized that the concentration factor was pretty weak. So I asked Munindraji to teach me mettā, because mettā and the brahmavihāras are a Samatha practice, a concentration practice, as well as developing those beautiful qualities. I felt that I could use both—that it would be good to develop the concentration as well as strengthen the mettā.

So I did. That was the first time I did a concentration practice. I did it for about six weeks in Bodh Gaya. Conditions were not great there—it was quite noisy, not ideal conditions for concentration practice—but I did it anyway. And it turned out to be very, very helpful.

After a few weeks of doing the intensive mettā—which most of you are familiar with, the repetition of the phrases and directing it towards an image and arousing the feeling, almost like a mantra of loving-kindness repeated again and again—my mind became somewhat concentrated. I remember thinking first that I was just filled with a lot of happiness. I had been struggling for so long, and finally the mind settled and became concentrated and easeful. I remember thinking at that time, "Oh, this is why people like to meditate." Because before that I was very committed to it, I knew it was important, but it wasn't fun. There was a lot of struggle.

Once the mind developed some degree of concentration—and again, this is not like the concentration of Dipa Ma, but it was enough to stabilize the mind, to make the mind and the concentration of mindfulness more effortless—I understood how Samatha and Vipassana can work together. At different times, one or another may be helpful. In the very beginning, I really needed to do the Vipassana, just to learn about what was going on. After some time, it became possible to actually do the Samatha in a way that was useful. And then that really helped the Vipassana when I went back to it.

So they're not at all, in any way whatsoever, opposing practices. They're different practices, but they support each other.

And so it's helpful, either in your own experience or working with a teacher, just to see at a particular time what might be helpful.

In the end, this is a long path we're on to full awakening—even though from the perspective of Buddha nature, we're already here. As one Tibetan teacher said, it's something like this: "You're already perfect, but there's much to improve." It's kind of like that. We can recognize the essential nature of the knowing mind, the essential nature of awareness, and still these qualities have to be cultivated so we actually are living them and realizing them and actualizing them.

So one practice is metta, and we'll get benefits from it. But how does it benefit others who are receiving the metta? That's a question. We may be here radiating loving thought and feeling, and we know that it can benefit us. Does it really benefit anybody else?

Of course, the power of the benefit will be proportional to the strength of the metta, which is informed by the strength of the concentration. As you may know from the very classic story of the Buddha, his evil cousin Devadatta sent a mad elephant charging down a narrow lane, thinking that the Buddha would either be killed or run away and so be discredited, because Devadatta wanted to take over the Sangha. And as the story goes, this charging mad elephant—and they're big—charging at him. The Buddha was

just radiating metta towards the elephant, and the elephant slowed down. Just before the Buddha, it's said the elephant bowed down in front of him, pacified by the power of the Buddha's loving-kindness.

So that's metta at its peak. It's probably best not to test our own metta in that kind of situation right away. We should test it slowly. But the benefit on others we can see in a much more ordinary way.

I'll illustrate it by talking of its opposite first. If you walk into a room, or maybe you're just with somebody who's very angry, do you feel that? Can't you feel the anger? The energy is tense, and maybe we get tense in response to it. And then what happens when you walk into a room or you're with somebody who is just very loving and very friendly and warm? Don't you feel that? This is not magical and it's not mystical. When we're with somebody like that, we feel warm and loving and friendly. So it has a very immediate effect on the people around us—the more loving we are, the kinder we are, the friendlier we are. It affects the people we meet in a very immediate way.

It was very interesting when we would visit Dipa Ma in Calcutta. She lived in very, very poor surroundings, just in two rooms with her daughter and grandson—certainly by Western standards, very, very poor. But we would go up into her room, and this room was just filled with light. In Indian fashion, we'd come in and kind of bow, and she'd do that Indian blessing of running her hands over our heads and shoulders. We would walk out totally blissed out. What was that from? It was from the power of her metta. There was just so much love coming that it was tangible. We could feel it. It was so heart-opening and uplifting. So it definitely has an impact, whether on the more ordinary level or on a special level when people have it very well developed.

Now, here's a question: "In sitting meditation, when aware of some or many mind states appearing and disappearing, sometimes quickly, it was noted that the mind was indifferent to these mind states. But upon investigation, by asking the question 'What are these mind states?' it seemed that the mind did not understand or recognize them, and thus was unable to react. In actuality, the mind was in confusion about the mind states. The mind seems unclear most of the time these days. Any suggestions?"

I think there's an interesting distinction here between being confused or deluded and not necessarily being able to name precisely what a mind state or emotion is. Especially when we're sitting and different moods or mind states are appearing and disappearing, and especially if they're coming somewhat quickly and we're not particularly caught in them, we're not identified with them, we know something's there—it's like a cloud passing through—we may not know exactly: Is it sadness? Is it unhappiness? Is it sorrow? Or on the other side: Is it happiness? Is it excitement?

We may not have the exact word for it. That doesn't matter if we can simply sit and remain aware that, yes, there's this mind state present—we don't know exactly what it is, but we're observing it. It just comes and goes, and we're not getting caught in it. We're not becoming identified with it. In that case, precise recognition is not necessary, because the whole point of recognition and precision is to enable us to see so that we are not identifying, so that we're not caught.

Is this clear? Something's there. We don't quite know what it is, but it's just passing through. It's not a problem. We're just there.

It becomes more important to investigate precisely when it feels like we're caught in an emotion or caught in a mind state—where we may be lost in the story around it, or it feels like it's really stuck. We're in it. Then precision and investigation of what it is can be very helpful.

I'll give you an example from my experience. There are many different examples, and I'm sure you've had your own. This goes back many years, but at one time I was meditating and I was feeling waves and waves and waves of sadness. It was just this very strong feeling. I'm noting: sadness, sadness, sadness, sadness. But it felt locked in, and I felt locked into it. I felt really identified with it.

The fact that I was so stuck aroused my interest. What's going on here? Why am I so caught? So I just kept looking more carefully at the emotion itself. What is this? And I saw that it wasn't sadness. It was unhappiness.

Now, these two emotions are close, but they're really different. They have very different flavors. As soon as I saw, "Oh yes, this is unhappiness," it was as if the mind could become aligned with what was actually there, instead of misperceiving and being slightly out of alignment. When I could see exactly—"Oh, this is unhappiness"—the alignment, the correct perception, allowed me to be accepting of it. That was the key. When I was misperceiving it, acceptance wasn't possible because I wasn't seeing clearly what it was.

Is this clear? It was quite remarkable, because it was just in that moment of getting in alignment—"Oh, unhappiness"—then I could just note: unhappy, unhappy, unhappy. And it washed through, as emotions will.

So in that kind of situation where we're caught or stuck, that's when precision can be really helpful.

I'll give you another example. This happened in Burma. I was sitting, and for those of you who have practiced in Asia, it's not uncommon for it to be incredibly noisy. This time in Burma, right outside my room, they were doing construction. They were straightening steel rebars, clanging metal on metal, all day long.

My mind went through all kinds of things. "Here I come to Burma to get enlightened and they're making all this noise." A lot of distress. But there was nothing to do about it. This was truly ungovernable, completely outside my control. So I was suffering a lot for quite a while.

But then, again, we can become interested in why the mind is suffering, what's going on that's causing the suffering. When I finally realized that it wasn't the sound—that's not what was making me suffer—I saw that my mind was complaining. It was just complaining mind, complaining a lot.

It's so interesting: as soon as I could recognize, "Oh, that's what's happening—complaining mind," the whole thing shifted. "Oh, complaining, complaining, complaining"—it just became another mind state. The sound was fine. The sound was just the sound.

So it's just another example of times when we're stuck—precision about what's happening can be helpful.

When we're not stuck, when it's all part of a flow, the precision is less important in terms of naming specifically what it is.

One day on this retreat, someone asked about an intriguing experience. They wrote, "I got up later than normal. When I was sleeping, someone called, 'Wake up, now nearly 4:30.' I opened my eyes, looked at the clock—4:20. The question is, who called me? My mind or a deva? If my mind called, how can the mind know the time so correctly? If a deva called me, it is extremely interesting because the deva here can speak Vietnamese."

I like that question, just because it might have been a deva—a Vietnamese-speaking deva.

There's a lot of mystery to the mind. The mind has unimaginable capacities. It's this huge, huge mystery—what the mind is, how it functions, and what it can do. And it's precisely this aspect that has kept me so interested for fifty years, because our practice just keeps going deeper, exploring the nature of this mind, of consciousness, of awareness. It can do so many things.

Of course, the stories of Dipa Ma are extraordinary examples of what the mind can do. But even in more ordinary ways, this is quite common. Very often people report that if they go to sleep with an intention to get up at a certain hour, the mind awakes at that time. Just the power of intention in the mind.

We can see this in samatha practice. When the mind has the ability to enter into certain concentrated states, we can make resolutions. "May this arise." And the mind just does it. "May I enter this state"—the mind does it. "May I come out of this state. May I be in it for ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes." The mind is this amazingly responsive mystery.

Different teachers teach metta in different ways, so there are many styles of doing metta practice. When we studied with Sayadaw U Pandita, the way he teaches is to do the metta phrases with visualization and arouse the feeling. Then over time, to begin making resolutions first for the jhanic factors—the five factors of mind that comprise the first jhana. In Pali they're vitakka, vicara, piti, sukha, and ekaggata: initial application, sustained application, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness.

The way he would teach is that after we had gotten into the momentum of the practice, he would say, "Make a resolution for these jhanic factors to arise." So: "May vitakka arise. May it become strong. May I experience it clearly." And then something would happen. Maybe not the first time—sometimes it took a while for these resolutions to start working—but at a certain point they do.

One of the most interesting things about the mind, and this goes back to the comment about the deva speaking Vietnamese: I was teaching metta to a Western student, an American. I gave her these instructions to make resolutions in Pali—"May vitakka arise, may vicara arise." She didn't speak Pali and she did not know the meaning of the words. And yet when she made the resolution, the same experiences happened as when anybody else made the resolution knowing the meaning of the words.

So what's that about? Maybe Pali is the inherent language of the nature of mind. It's just a mystery, and there are a lot of mysteries.

In some way, what we're all doing in the day-to-day practice—which at times can feel difficult or like struggling, with all the many ups and downs that everybody experiences—what we're really doing is developing the tools and the strengths to investigate this mind. To investigate it on deeper and deeper levels, with all of these mysterious things it can do. And to see more and more clearly, most fundamentally: What is the cause of suffering? And how can I come to the end of it?

This is something that we're actually doing through our observation. And we just need to develop the tools of mindfulness, of concentration, of wise effort—all the things you're familiar with.

What's the difference between observing lobha and dosa—greed and hatred—in cittānupassanā, that is mindfulness of the mind, which is the third foundation of mindfulness? In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta there's mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, and then mindfulness of dhammas, which include a whole range of things. So in mindfulness of the mind, the third foundation, the Buddha talks about being mindful of when greed is present and when it's not present, when anger or hatred is present and when it's not present. The question is, what's the difference between that and when the Buddha talks about being mindful of greed and hatred in the fourth foundation, dhammas, under hindrances? Because they're many of the same qualities. Why are they repeated? Or is there a difference in how we're practicing?

This may seem a little theoretical based on the sutta, but it does point to some interesting practice implications. In the third foundation of mindfulness, the instruction is very simple. It simply says: be mindful when greed is present, when it's not present. Be mindful when hatred or anger is present, when it's not present, when delusion is present or not present, and then a few other states. So it's very simple—just to be aware whether this is present in the mind or not present.

There are a couple of interesting points here. One is something that we often overlook and which would be very helpful to incorporate in our practice. Usually we give emphasis to when these states are present. We're mindful when there's greed or desire in the mind, mindful when there's anger or hatred in the mind. We pick it up and note it. But we don't often pay attention to those times when it's not present. We're not recognizing those moments: "Oh, at this time there is no desire in the mind. At this time there's no aversion in the mind." But the Buddha is saying, pay attention to both.

This would be interesting to remember to do from time to time, because it will build confidence. We're so used to seeing and being with the hindrances and the defilements that very often the mind can just get discouraged or fall into self-judgment—"My mind is so filled with these defilements." But it's not. Those defilements, those kilesas, are not there all the time. They're there at times, and then they're not there. When we pay attention and recognize, "Oh yes, now the mind is free of those defilements, there's no desire present, no anger present," we're actually getting a certain taste of freedom. We're experiencing the mind free of defilements at that time. We learn to recognize it, which is helpful because then we can come back to it more easily and it builds confidence in

us. We see, "Oh yes, the mind's not so bad after all. It has a lot of times when it's wholesome, when it's free." So that's one aspect I feel is implied in this third foundation—knowing when these things are present and when they're not present.

It also highlights the importance of just discerning the difference between skillful and unskillful mind states. Normal people who do not come on retreat—just all those normal people out there—I think it's very rare for them to be watching their minds carefully enough to actually discern what are wholesome mind states, what are unwholesome mind states. This is not the usual way people live in the world. And in fact sometimes it's the opposite.

I'll give you one example. One year I was teaching at a Trappist monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. It was quite a liberal monastery. They invited different Buddhist teachers to come and teach, and they invited me to come and teach metta. Just before I came, there had been some kind of teaching that was more therapeutic-minded, more psychologically oriented rather than meditative. Basically the message was: honor your anger. From a therapeutic psychological point of view, one can understand what's meant by it. But it's very easy, with "honor your anger," to fall into the understanding that somehow anger is good because it's arising within us and we should honor it.

I think what's really meant—at least from a Buddhist perspective—is that we can honor the fact that anger has arisen. We can say, "Yes, it's here," without denying it or avoiding it or pushing it down. In that sense, we can honor the fact of it being there in the present moment.

But that's very different than honoring the anger as being some wholesome state. Do you see the difference?

The Buddha, in his teachings, places tremendous emphasis on this wise discernment of skillful and unskillful, of wholesome and unwholesome, in terms of the different mind states that arise. And this is the foundation really—this is the whole ethical foundation of our practice. Unskillful mind states lead to suffering for ourselves and others. Wholesome mind states lead to happiness for ourselves and others. So it's very pragmatic. It's not coming down from on high, telling us what's what. We should see for ourselves. We should make this discernment in our own minds. We should be careful enough in our observation as we go through these different states, honoring whatever it is that's arising and the fact that it has arisen, but then with discernment. Oh, is this wholesome? Is this unwholesome? And we can feel that. We can see that for ourselves.

So all of that is in this third foundation of mindfulness. In the fourth foundation, where the Buddha is talking about recognizing these states as hindrances—that's the category in the fourth foundation. Here the Buddha gives more specific instructions. I thought I would read the specific instruction, and I think you're very familiar with this.

The Buddha asks, "And how does one, in regard to dhammas, abide contemplating these dhammas in terms of the five hindrances?" There are three steps, and I've condensed them a bit. First, in dealing with them as a hindrance, know when a hindrance is present and when it's not present. So that's the same as before. But then, know the conditions that lead to the arising of the hindrance. That's something more than was said earlier. It's not just knowing whether it's present or not present, but investigating: what are the conditions that lead to the arising of it? And what are the conditions that lead to the removal of it?

You see, there's a little more investigation here, because in this foundation of mindfulness, the Buddha is not just naming these mind states—he's saying these mind states are hindrances; they hinder our practice. And so we need to investigate them a little further. Are they present or not? What are the conditions leading to them and removing them? And know the conditions that prevent a future arising.

This gets very interesting, and we have so many opportunities to practice this. Just as an exercise while you're here—and your time here is so precious because, as I've said many times, you're all in a laboratory of awareness. That's all you have to do. Your only job, besides pot washing—and even in pot washing—your only job is to be aware, to be watching. Okay, a desire arises, or aversion arises. What was the cause of that? Was that because I saw something and I wasn't mindful of seeing? So we investigate.

I had such a liberating example of this when I was on retreat years ago. Many of you probably have heard me tell this story—it was so powerful for me. I noticed, being on retreat, that every time I walked into the dining room for meals, my mind would have a comment about almost everybody. Some kind of judgment. I liked what they were wearing, I didn't like what they were wearing. They were moving too quickly, they were moving too slowly. They took too much food, they didn't take enough food. It didn't matter—it was ridiculous. But the mind just kept doing it, just commenting about everyone.

So at a certain point I thought, come on, mind, why do you keep doing this? Because it was clearly so ridiculous. And then I realized all of those thoughts, all of those mildly aversive thoughts, were all happening based on eye contact, visual. I was seeing someone and I was not being mindful that I was seeing. Seeing, perception of the person, leading to all kinds of proliferation of thought, all these judgments.

So what I started doing was this: I would walk into the dining room, and from the moment I walked in, all I would note was "seeing."

Just seeing, seeing, seeing—in line for food, seeing, taking the food, seeing, taking the food. It was amazing. In that simple note, being mindful of seeing, all of those judgments and comments disappeared.

This is the kind of investigation the Buddha is suggesting we do in this foundation of mindfulness. What's the cause of the hindrances arising? How can they be removed? And how can we avoid them arising in the future?

Of course, we can do this with all of the sense doors. Maybe you have a hindrance of aversion that comes, and you notice while watching it that every time it arises, it's because of a particular thought. One thought comes into the mind, and then there's a whole story which causes aversion to arise. Well, if you're investigating the cause of that aversion, then you see—oh, it's that thought. If I can be mindful of that thought arising—thinking, thinking, it's just a thought—the hindrance doesn't arise.

Do you see the power of this? This is what the Buddha is talking about in this fourth foundation of mindfulness. Not only knowing whether a hindrance is present or not present, but doing a further investigation. Can I see the cause? Can I see how to remove it? Can I see how to prevent it?

And in this way, we really develop a mind of much greater ease. We really find a place of greater happiness.

CHAPTER 2

# Right Speech

Joseph Goldstein · 55 min

> *In this talk, Joseph Goldstein illuminates right speech (sammā vācā) as the third factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, emphasizing that our whole life—not just formal meditation—constitutes our practice. He notes that seven of the ten unwholesome actions are purified through right speech, right action, and right livelihood, underscoring their central importance to liberation rather than being secondary concerns.*
>
> *Goldstein examines the four aspects of right speech in depth: truthfulness (refraining from false speech), avoiding slander and gossip, speaking with gentle rather than harsh energy, and refraining from useless talk (samphappalāpa). He shares personal stories, including a profound teaching moment with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita that revealed how even subtle self-deception can arise, and an experiment from his Peace Corps days of not speaking about any third person—which eliminated ninety percent of his speech and dramatically quieted his judgmental mind.*
>
> *The talk explores how speech serves as a powerful mirror for our mental states, revealing conceit (māna), fear, and other defilements. Goldstein offers the Buddha's challenging instruction to maintain loving-kindness even when others speak harshly or untruthfully to us. He concludes with the Buddha's five marks of well-spoken speech: timely, true, gentle, purposeful, and spoken with loving-kindness—presenting right speech as a transformative practice that aligns us with truth itself, the very essence of Dhamma.*

We often think of meditation as being at the very heart of the path of awakening. And in many ways it is. The development of mindfulness, of concentration, of equanimity—all make possible the wisdom that liberates the mind.

But as many of you will be leaving tomorrow and the others leaving in a month or so, it's important to remember that the Buddha's path of liberation is much more inclusive of all of our life's activities than just the invaluable but specialized situation of intensive retreat. We need to remember and internalize the understanding in a very meaningful way that our whole life is our practice. It's not just formal meditation practice.

We see this with unmistakable clarity in the Buddhist teachings of the Eightfold Path. It's the Eightfold Path which is the path to awakening. Having established ourselves to some extent in right understanding and in right thought—which are the thoughts of re-

nunciation, thoughts of loving-kindness, thoughts of compassion—in the next three steps of this Eightfold Path, the Buddha lays out how right understanding and right thought can be applied in our lives. These next three steps have to do with right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

It's interesting to notice, as we reflect on our own commitment to practice and commitment to liberation, how we might have the tendency to make these three steps on the path somewhat lesser in importance than developing meditation or mindfulness or concentration. They're important, but not quite as important—we often hold our practice in that way. But if we think in this way, we are really fragmenting our lives. We're saying one part of our life is about the practice, and the whole rest of our life is something else.

It's interesting to notice that of the ten unwholesome actions that the Buddha spoke of, seven of them are purified by these three steps on the path: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. So this is not something secondary. It's not of lesser importance. And as we give attention to these steps, we really begin to see the role of ethics as being not simply a way to live a good life, but we see ethics in its relationship to freedom, to liberation.

The first of this triad of path factors is right speech, and that's what I'd like to talk about this evening.

Speech is such a powerful influence on our lives precisely because we speak a lot. A good part of our lives is spent talking. And we can see—it doesn't take much insight to see—that speech conditions our relationships. The way we speak conditions the quality of our hearts, of our minds, and it also conditions karmic consequences in the future. So speech is something powerful that we need to pay attention to.

The most basic aspect of right speech is truthfulness: refraining from saying that which is untrue. Although this may seem so obvious and straightforward—simply don't say what is untrue—it may not be as easy to practice as we assume. So it's worth really investigating this idea of truthfulness.

There are many kinds of false speech, from slight exaggerations or humorous untruths to falsehoods whose motivation might be a kind of self-protection, or maybe we have a motivation to protect others, and that becomes a reason in our minds for speaking that which is untrue. Sometimes, hopefully not often, there may be deliberate lies with malicious intent to cause divisiveness or harm.

We see this played out on a national scale in every election year, where the norm is for candidates to make many statements and claims, many of which are simply untrue. I heard one report recently that the most honest of the candidates now running spoke truth little more than fifty percent of the time. Isn't that amazing? And that's the most honest. So there's something a little askew here in terms of our commitment, our valuing of this.

We might inquire in our own lives: whenever we might be saying something which is untrue, just even if it's a small one—hopefully it's not some big untruth that wants to cause harm—but at whatever level, whenever we find ourselves saying something which is not quite true, can we stop and pay attention and inquire inside? What's the motivation? Is it greed for something? We're really wanting something and so we bend the truth a little bit. Is it a desire for recognition or some kind of self-aggrandizement? Or maybe we tell a little lie or a big lie out of fear of rejection from someone, or out of jealousy. There could be many different motives, and we want to understand ourselves. We want to see what's going on in our minds.

It complicates our lives a lot, because then we need to tell other lies to support the first ones, and then we need to remember all of it. Mark Twain, with his usual insightful humor, said, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." It's helpful to remember that. It just makes our lives very simple.

But even more than that simplicity, as we all know, lying is a tremendously harmful and corrosive force in our relationships, in our society, because it undermines our ability to trust. The great German philosopher Nietzsche said, "I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you." And we know that from different personal relationships we've had—when somebody has been untruthful, that sense of trust has been lost.

The Buddha spoke of this very directly, very bluntly. He said, "Thus one should never knowingly speak a lie, either for the sake of one's own advantage, or for the sake of another person's advantage, or for the sake of any advantage whatsoever." That's a very unambiguous statement. Thus one should never knowingly speak a lie.

And it's said that in the Bodhisattva's long journey to Buddhahood—in the teachings the Buddha spent countless lifetimes as a Bodhisattva perfecting all the qualities of a Buddha, the paramis—it's said that at different times over the course of these many lifetimes, the Bodhisattva broke all of the different precepts at one time or another. But it's said that the one precept he didn't break in all that time was the precept about truthfulness. So central is truthfulness to the path of awakening. We need to really make this very conscious in our lives as an inspiration for our own commitment to being truthful.

But what is so surprising is that something which seems so simple—just be truthful—can be surprisingly difficult at times. Very often little lies just seem to tumble out before we are even conscious of it.

A story which I've told very often, but it's so illustrative of this tendency. This happened years ago at the retreat center during one of the three-month retreats. Like here, at the retreat center there are these big walk-in refrigerators and freezers where the food is stored. So one evening a staff person was going into the refrigerator for something, and there was a yogi in the walk-in refrigerator with their hand in the box of almonds or something. The staff person very politely said, "Can I help you?" And just without thinking at all, the yogi replied, "Oh, I'm looking for the maintenance person." The first thing that came to mind—that kind of self-protective mode. This wasn't a lie with great malicious intent, but there are strong tendencies in the mind.

Just another example: at the end of the three-month course at the retreat center we usually have a few days of integration where people are talking with one another in different group discussions. After some of those discussions one of the yogis came up to me, I guess a little bit by way of confession, but also just reporting, that as yogis were talking to one another and part of it was talking about their meditation—how long do you sit?—this person said that for some reason, whenever that was a topic of discussion, he always added fifteen minutes to his sitting capacity. Again, it's just a small little thing. But we can be aware of these small little things, these small falsehoods.

There might also be lies of omission, where we're covering or withholding something that's of importance. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, "Lying is done with words and also with silence." So that's an even more subtle aspect. The untruth can be not only what we say but at times maybe what we don't say.

We can see this a lot in our society. Just in thinking about this talk, I was reminded of a line from a Bob Dylan song, "Blowin' in the Wind." One of the lines is, "How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?" When we look at the injustices in our society—the racism or the homophobia or sexism or many kinds of injustice and oppression, which can be so blatant and so obvious—how many times do we just turn our heads and pretend that we just don't see? That's another kind of internal lying. There's a lot of depth to this inquiry.

Or we might be living under the illusion that yes, all this may happen with other people, but I would never lie. I had a very powerful situation where I saw that if we don't acknowledge the potential in our own minds for this possibility, it becomes much harder to see it when it actually happens, because we're living under the illusion that I would never do that.

This was an extremely powerful and painful and ultimately freeing experience I had in my meditation practice with Sayadaw U Pandita. This goes back more than thirty years, the first time that I sat with him. As you know, he was a very formidable teacher. We were going for interviews every day and it was very intense—the whole form of reporting was intense, and he was very intense.

And I was lost in some idea of where my practice was. I was familiar with all the stages of insight, and I had some notion of where I was on the path. In some way, I was presenting my report through the filter of that belief. It wasn't simply a straightforward account of what was actually going on—it was shaded through that sense of where I thought I was.

I finished my report, and Sayadaw just said three words to me: "That's not true."

I was devastated. You can imagine the intensity of the situation, this revered teacher delivering those words. It was devastating. It took me days to recover. I would be sitting for days, filled with guilt and shame and self-judgment—all the feelings and emotions you might imagine.

But finally I came to a certain realization, and it was a freeing realization: acknowledging that yes, my mind can do that. My mind did do that. And so there it was, caught in the headlights. There was great freedom in that recognition, even though it was incredibly painful to see and to have it pointed out in that way. I was letting go of a previously unnoticed pretense and delusion—the belief that my mind would be incapable of doing such a thing.

By seeing and by opening to the truth that yes, the mind can do that also, that it can shade the truth even in situations where one would think we would never do it, it became much easier to recognize whatever impulses arose in the mind to do so. I became less self-judgmental about it all, and developed the actual ability, through seeing it clearly, to refrain from that kind of speech.

This is about honesty regarding our own minds—what they can do and what they do at different times. As one character in the book *Zorba the Greek* said, "Self-knowledge is always bad news." The more we look at our minds, the more we see all of these shadowy parts of ourselves. But we need to see them, and it's ultimately liberating and freeing to do so. Because as we open up to the shadow side and make it more conscious, we become able to make wiser choices. When we don't see it, when we're simply living in the delusion that our minds would never do such a thing, then we're simply acting out all of these sometimes hidden patterns.

Truthfulness as the first aspect of right speech has profound implications. This is significant because our whole goal in practice is to see what is true. In fact, that's one of the meanings of the word *Dharma*—the true nature of things. When we're practicing the Dharma, we are actually practicing what is true.

Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote about this in his book on the Noble Eightfold Path. He said, "Truthful speech establishes a correspondence between our inner being and the real nature of phenomena. Thus, much more than simply being an ethical principle, devotion to truthful speech is a matter of taking our stand on reality rather than illusion."

I think this is a beautiful statement because it connects our speech to our commitment to seeing things truthfully, to seeing things as they are.

The Buddha was so clear about this. When we read the suttas, he expressed the overriding importance of truthfulness in a conversation he had with his son, Rahula, who at the time was a novice monk. The Buddha pointed to a bowl with just a little bit of water at the bottom and said, "So little—just like that little bit of water—so little is the spiritual achievement of one who is not afraid to tell a deliberate lie. Therefore, one should not tell a deliberate lie even in jest."

These are strong statements. And so can we bring our mindfulness and dedication to our practice to this huge realm of speech? This is a very big part of all of our lives.

At the same time, we need to recognize that this is a practice. We may not be perfect in it—and probably will not be. There may be times when little lies tumble out. "Oh, I'm just looking for the maintenance person." Or shading the truth to present ourselves in a certain way. There are many variations. We may not be perfect in this, but if we take it as a practice and commit to it as a practice, then we're sensitizing ourselves to those times when we might be saying a small falsehood. It's almost as if a little mindfulness bell goes off within us. We find ourselves having said something and realize, "Oh, that wasn't exactly true." This mindfulness bell sounds: "Ah yes, that was not true." It helps to wake us up when we really establish our commitment to right speech.

So truthfulness is the first aspect of right speech. The second aspect is refraining from slandering, from gossip, from backbiting—those words that cause disharmony and loss of friendship. Again, the Buddha is very direct. He said, "What one has heard here is not repeated there, so as to cause dissension. What one has heard there is not repeated here, so as not to cause dissension. One unites those who are divided and encourages those who are united. One delights and rejoices in concord, and it is concord or harmony that one spreads by one's words."

This itself is a very powerful practice. A question for us to consider, given the strong worldwide tendency to gossip and speak about others: this is not unique to any particular person. As it says in the Buddhist texts, this is the nature of the uninstructed worldlings, which is most of humanity. We love this kind of gossiping. So it's interesting just to inquire why. What is the pleasure? What is the enjoyment of it? When we're gossiping about others, does it in some way reaffirm our own sense of self? It would be interesting to look the next time we find ourselves in that situation. What's the pleasure in it? Is there some ego gratification?

Another example of this—and this one had a happier outcome for me. Again, this goes back years to when I was first starting to teach, maybe in the late seventies. Meditation was just beginning to become known in the culture, well before it became popular. A quite well-known journalist came to interview me about meditation and this new thing that was beginning to happen. He was very skilled, and he started asking me about all the various teachers who were teaching meditation. Of course, I had my own opinions and two cents about everyone he mentioned. I could just feel it—he'd ask me, "Oh, what do you think about so-and-so?" and I could feel that impulse arising: "Oh, yeah..."

But fortunately, at that time, I was mindful enough to see that impulse. No, I don't need to say this. And so I didn't. I didn't speak about anybody else. Then a few weeks later, when the article came out and everything I had said was in print, I reflected with tremendous appreciation for the restraint that I had managed to have. I was just imagining—well, what if I had actually given voice to all these various opinions and then they were all in the article? It would have felt terrible. So there's great power in being aware, when we can, before we give voice to this tendency.

I first became interested in Buddhism when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I had just finished college and was teaching English, and it was my first introduction to Buddhist teachings. I got very interested, excited, and enthusiastic. I was first learning about the Eightfold Path and right speech. So I was reading about this, and I decided that for a period of time I was going to make an experiment: I would not speak about any third person. If the person wasn't there, I wasn't going to speak about them.

It was amazing. It was like ninety percent of my speech was eliminated. It was so astounding to realize how much of our talk is about other people. And there were some very interesting consequences of that experiment. One is that I found my mind became much less judgmental, because I wasn't giving voice to the judgments—even if they weren't harsh, even friendly ones. If I wasn't giving voice to that pattern of judging oth-

ers, I found that my mind actually got a lot quieter. And as there was less judgment of others, I also saw that there was a lot less self-judgment, because I wasn't reinforcing that pattern.

So you might, if you want, just make an experiment for a period of time. Sometimes it can be challenging—if you're with somebody and they're speaking about someone else... I smiled a lot. Just finding ways not to engage in the conversation, or even to say what one is practicing. It becomes a little education moment. But even if we're not following such a strict guideline and we just engage in normal conversation, we can still take a lot of care in how we speak of other people. What is the motivation?

This goes back to the Buddha's words, which I have found to be an incredibly important practice: what one has heard here is not repeated there so as to cause dissension. When we're speaking about others, just in a friendly way or among friends, what is our intention? Is the intention to bring people together, or is the intention to divide in some way? Simply paying attention to that would have a tremendous impact on our speech and would be very transformative.

It would be transformative in the world if, in our speech and speaking about other people, we only spoke that which brought people together rather than divided them. That would transform not only our own worlds and relationships, but it would have a huge influence in our society, in our culture.

On another whole level, speech can be a kind of gossip about ourselves. It's really a form of māna, which is the Pali word usually translated as conceit. It's that sense of the underlying "I am"—I am better than, I'm worse than, I'm equal to. It doesn't matter what the comparison is; it's the constellation of the I am-ness. This is māna.

We can notice if in our speech, in our conversation, we're overly self-referential. I'm sure we've noticed it in other people, but can we notice in ourselves if we're always bringing the conversation back to ourselves in some way or another? And again, it's insightful to look at the motivation.

Or we might have the opposite kind of māna. Rather than always taking center stage, being at the center of things, maybe we are always staying behind the scenes and never giving voice to what we think or feel. That's another kind of māna, of "I am." Maybe we're feeling inferior, we don't feel worthy of speaking. So it's just to look at all these kinds of speech and non-speech to see what the motivation is behind it.

It is such a powerful mirror and reflection for our states of mind, because it's so obvious when we're really being mindful. It's out there. And if we're looking, if we're paying attention, it's such a mirror of what our minds are doing.

I had another interesting example of the power of māna, of conceit. This defilement is not uprooted until one is an arahant. So even after we've freed ourselves from the view of self and freed ourselves from desire and anger—these are high stages of realization—māna is still there. It's not uprooted until the final stage of liberation. It goes very, very deep.

I was with a friend and we were driving back from New York. I had the thought to say something that was not related to anything—it wasn't related to our experience, what we had done. It was just an "I am" thought. It was basically a thought that was announcing, "Here I am." We're old friends and we're driving in the car for hours, but this thought came to say something. I saw it. I saw it in my mind. That's really just māna. And it went away.

About fifteen seconds later, the same thought comes. I see you. It went away. Third time, fourth time, fifth time. It kept coming back. I don't know what number it was—the fifteenth time or the twentieth time—out it came. It was just so interesting. I was being mindful in that time, so it was fascinating to observe the power of it. And it was about something completely unimportant. There was no reason to say it, except that the force of māna wanted to be expressed.

So speech, if we're paying attention to it, can reveal things about our minds. It can reveal the potency and the power of different defilements in the mind. And likewise, it can reveal the wholesome intentions.

The third aspect of right speech has to do with the emotional tone.

What's the energy behind our words? The Buddha talked of this aspect of right speech as refraining from harsh, angry, or abusive speech. And again, the Buddha was really clear. He said, "One speaks such words as are gentle, soothing to the ear, loving. Such words as go to the heart, are courteous, friendly, and agreeable to many." Can we practice that? Can we practice speaking in that kindly way?

Years ago when I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya—this goes back to the late 60s—there were just a few of us then. This was before lots of people came. Maybe there were ten of us staying at this Burmese Vihara in Bodh Gaya. It was not a structured retreat, but we were all doing our own practice, so there was a little bit of informality about it.

We had been there quite a long time, and one evening we all got together. There was a young woman there who had a guitar, and as we were sitting around she said she had just written a song about all of us. The thought I had was that this was going to be like a funny roast, just pointing out the quirks of each person, as we're very likely to do in that situation.

But instead—and it was so surprising—her song, in speaking about each person, described what their beautiful qualities were. That was her song. And what surprised me was how surprising it was to me, because I expected exactly the opposite. It was unusual to have somebody express things in that loving way. It was striking and very beautiful.

So it's an example of how we can use our speech in a way that creates concord, that creates harmony, that brings people together. We really need to be conscious of the energy behind our words. Just think of how you might feel if angry, harsh words were being directed at you. How would we feel? Mostly, we would feel hurt, or defensive, or maybe get angry in return. That is not a good environment for communication when that kind of energy is happening between people. And really the essence of right speech is about connection. It's about communication. So we need to pay attention to the quality of the energy of our words.

Here it's not so much a question of suppressing feelings or emotions. Sometimes we may need to say difficult things—but how do we say it? Can we say it in a way that connects, in a way that can be heard?

Right speech also has implications for how we listen. How do we listen to others speaking? There's one teaching from the Buddha on this—it's really about right listening—which is a great practice and very challenging. I'll read what he said, and you'll see how challenging it is and what a high level the Buddha is suggesting that we practice at.

He said, "Bhikkhus, there are five ways of speech that others may use when they speak to you. Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or with harm, spoken with a mind of loving-kindness or with a mind of inner hate. Herein, bhikkhus, you should train yourself thus: Our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving-kindness."

So just imagine somebody is yelling at you very harshly, saying that which is untrue, wanting to cause you harm. And the Buddha is saying we should train ourselves thus: our minds will remain unaffected, we shall utter no unskillful words, we shall abide compassionate for their welfare. You see how challenging? That's a hugely challenging practice.

But it is really the practice of being present, of being mindful. This is mindfulness externally, where we're mindful of what the other person is doing, even with all the unskillfulness that's present, but our hearts can remain unaffected and actually practice feeling compassion for their welfare.

This is not easy to do, but I love having it as a reference point for a possibility. When we find ourselves in those situations, maybe we can remember this and it just helps us a little bit to stay in that place of openness, of compassion, of mettā.

Do you see that right speech is not some secondary practice on a spiritual path? The practice of right speech can bring us right to the edge of our capacity and our willingness to be present. It's an essential part of our path of practice.

The last aspect of right speech—it's not saying that which is untrue, it's not gossiping and backbiting, it's not speaking harshly or angrily—the last aspect is refraining from useless talk. And the Pali word for this, I think is my favorite word in Pali. It's a word that expresses onomatopoeia, which means that the word sounds like what it is. So the Pali word for useless talk is *samphappalāpa*. Just don't *samphappalāpa*. It's just what it sounds like.

I have seen this so often, just in ordinary social situations, just hanging out with friends. We're not saying anything bad or using harsh speech, but how often I can see the tendency of the mind just to say something that is completely useless. It has no point whatsoever except to be speaking. That's the only point of it.

This can have some harmful consequences. So this is a story of a friend of mine from New York. He was taking a trip to Bali, and he got on the plane having injured his arm. He had a rubber exercise ball to exercise his hand and arm. The flight attendant came by and was interested and said, "What is that?" Keep in mind this was before 9/11—you have to keep that in mind. So the flight attendant says, "What is that?" And just by way of joking, he said, "Plastique," which is an explosive. It's what people use to blow things up. Even before 9/11, within a couple of minutes, the police were on the plane. They took him off. The airline threatened to never let him fly again. It took him days to disentangle from that one moment of *samphappalāpa*.

Usually it doesn't have quite such dramatic consequences, but it can. More importantly, what I've noticed is when I see that tendency—and it's a common one, just the urge to say something that is really useless—when I see that impulse and I can be mindful of it and refrain from speaking it, I can feel the conservation of energy. That kind of speech is like energy leaks; it's enervating. We lose the respect of others because our words, at least in that situation, are useless.

Every time we can see it—no, I don't have to say that—there's really a very good feeling. It feels like one of life's little victories over Māra. Māra says, "Just say that even though it's useless." No, no, I don't have to say that. We settle back and there's a feeling of strength, a feeling of inner strength.

There's one meditation teacher, his name is Jonathan Foust. He has a very good acronym. His acronym is WAIT—W-A-I-T—and it stands for Why Am I Talking? When I read that, I thought, perfect. Can we remember that? Why am I talking? It would reveal a lot about our minds.

In this way, this kind of attention shows us, it's a reflection, it's a mirror of what's going on in our minds. The Buddha expressed it this way: one speaks at the right time, in accordance with facts, speaks what is useful, speaks of the Dhamma.

Such a person's speech is like a treasure, uttered at the right moment, accompanied by reason, moderate and full of sense.

Here, the Buddha was really talking to monastics, and so he's given quite a high standard, basically saying one should speak only the Dharma. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in some of his writings, explained that as lay people, we may have slightly wider parameters. Acknowledging, as Bhikkhu Bodhi said in his own words, we have "more need for affectionate small talk" as lay people—with family and friends, polite conversation with acquaintances, or talk in connection with our work.

But even within these more expanded guidelines for our life in the world, can we pay attention to *samphappalāpa*? Even as we're speaking in a more relaxed way, can we refrain from useless talk? It's a tremendously powerful practice.

It's not by accident that the Buddha gave so much importance to this. This is the third step on the Eightfold Path. This is a key element of our spiritual practice. And it's such a powerful one because speech is such a big part of our lives. It's not a small thing. If we really take on right speech as a practice, this is a very powerful way of imbuing our lives with mindfulness. People often ask, "How can I bring the practice into the world?" If we did nothing other than pay attention to speech, we would be mindful throughout most of the day.

So can we really take this on? When we do, not only does it cultivate abstinence from unwholesome mind states, but right speech or wise speech also helps cultivate the beautiful qualities of *mettā*, of loving-kindness, of compassion, of sympathetic joy. And most importantly, as we practice right speech, it aligns us and keeps us in alignment with what is true. And that is the very essence of Dharma practice.

I'll close with this, also from the suttas. The Buddha says, "If speech has five marks, it is well spoken, not badly spoken, blameless and above reproach from the wise. What are these five marks? It is speech that is timely, true, gentle, purposeful, and spoken with a mind of loving-kindness."

If we can keep these in mind—speech that is timely, true, gentle, purposeful, and spoken with a mind of loving-kindness—then this becomes a powerful force for the Dharma in all our lives.

CHAPTER 3

# Doubt and Aversion

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min

> *In this profound talk from a People of Color Retreat, Joseph Goldstein examines two of the five hindrances that the Buddha identified as particularly seductive obstacles to awakening: doubt (vicikicchā) and aversion (dosa). Drawing from the Buddha's enlightenment narrative under the Bodhi tree, where "the mind of the great being was not moved" despite Māra's challenges, Goldstein illuminates how these universal patterns operate in our practice and daily lives.*
>
> *Goldstein makes a crucial distinction between skillful inquiry—the questioning mind the Buddha encouraged—and skeptical doubt, which he describes as "choosing immobility as a means of transportation." He explores how doubt manifests as endless indecision about practice methods, comparison between traditions, and most insidiously, as self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness. Citing the Dalai Lama's direct words that feelings of unworthiness are "wrong, absolutely wrong," and Sogyal Rinpoche's insight that such feelings are "real but not true," Goldstein emphasizes recognizing doubt's masquerade as wisdom.*
>
> *Turning to aversion in its many flavors—anger, fear, ill will, the judging mind—Goldstein reveals how we become seduced by the "honeyed tip" of feeling right while missing the "poisoned source" of our own suffering. He offers practical guidance: when struggling, ask "what am I not accepting?" He concludes with Thich Nhất Hạnh's teaching on holding anger with tenderness, allowing mindfulness to "infiltrate" and transform these hindrances into the very path of awakening.*

In one description of the Buddha's enlightenment, he's sitting under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India, and it's said that when he sat down, he sat with the resolve that he was not going to get up from his seat until he had achieved full realization. So imagine coming into the hall with that resolution—some indication of the strength of his mind and, I guess, his good karma. Fortunately, that very evening he did achieve it.

As the legend has it—or the reality of it—as he sat under the tree and the night progressed, it's said that different forms of Mara appeared in his mind. Mara is the embodiment of illusion, delusion, or ignorance. During the course of the night there were terrifying visions of violence and aggression, and there were very seductive visions of heavenly and celestial pleasures.

In one particular description there's a line which for me captures the essence of the whole path of practice. It's a beautiful description of the bodhisattva's mind in this situation. With all these forces of Mara coming to confront him, it said, "And the mind of the great being was not moved." Just the image of that—like a mountain sitting. The mind of the great being was not moved.

"Not moved" here is in the sense that Gina spoke so clearly about last evening: being non-reactive. The horrible things were arising, the beautiful things were arising, and his mind remained non-reactive, unmoving. This line can really be the reference point for all of our practice, because as we go through the day, watching and being with our various experiences—in whatever posture we're in, in whatever activity we're engaged with—we can look and investigate: What does have the power to move our minds? What does have the power to agitate our hearts? How does our mind get seduced by various experiences?

This is what we can learn on retreat, in the beauty of the silence and the non-distracted awareness. We really learn about ourselves.

We experience agitation and seduction on both very obvious levels that we may be familiar with, but also on very subtle levels. We're all familiar with being overwhelmed by different emotions at times—that's a familiar experience for all of us at one time or another. We can get lost in, seduced by, various moods that we're in, becoming completely caught up in the mood, or lost in and identified with the different thoughts running through our minds.

On the most subtle level—and this takes quite a bit of training and awareness to begin to see—we become identified with consciousness itself. We create a sense of self, a sense of ego self, in our very identification with knowing. There are all these levels to our practice, and as we deepen, we begin to explore them.

In the teachings, the Buddha highlighted a number of these particularly seductive mind states. In a way, he made it easy for us because he pointed out very specifically and very clearly: these mind states have the power to seduce us, to trap us again and again. He called them the five hindrances. Many of you are probably familiar with them: desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt.

It's essential in our practice that we learn how to recognize these particular states because they are deeply ingrained habits of mind. For me, it's both encouraging and discouraging at the same time that these very states we all experience right here—wanting and restlessness and sleepiness and doubt—are the very same ones the

Buddha was talking about 2,600 years ago. These are universal patterns, deep neural pathways in our brains. We need to explore them, to really learn about them, because otherwise they dominate our lives.

We want to explore the nature of these hindrances. What is each one like? How does each one manifest for ourselves in our own experience? And we also want to investigate what makes them so alluring. Why is it that we get caught again and again?

A very helpful perspective as we explore these patterns is to see that even though they may feel very personal to us, they are not personal—they're impersonal. These are universal habit patterns of everyone's mind. If we take it out of the personal, first it helps us disentangle a bit. Secondly, it provides us with the understanding that right in the time of experiencing one of these hindrances, that is exactly the place where we can see for ourselves, explore for ourselves: What is ignorance? What is awareness? What is delusion? What is wakefulness?

Right in the time of their arising, if we bring mindfulness to them, we're at the heart of what it means to awaken, to wake up. If we have this attitude, then in a very surprising way—and I've experienced this many times—we actually become happy to see the hindrances, because we'd rather see them and understand them than not see them and act them out. Instead of being self-judgmental or thinking our practice is no good, every time we're actually aware of one of the hindrances, we can think, "Oh good, this is a chance to understand something."

This changes our relationship to these patterns. The more we practice being with them and staying mindful of them—these strong, seductive emotions—the more stable our awareness becomes. It's as if we're actually in the stream of that line about the bodhisattva: the mind of the great being was not moved. Perhaps for us, even if it's for just a few moments at a time as we experience different difficulties, we too can touch that unmoved awareness.

and our minds of somewhat less than great beings are not moved. But we can taste it. We can get a sense of the potential.

So tonight I'd like to speak about just two of the hindrances, because a lot can be said about each one of them, and I wanted to go into a little more depth about two in particular: the hindrances of doubt and aversion.

There are a couple of steps in working with all five of the hindrances. The first step is learning how to recognize them when they arise. Because often these mind states will slip in and we don't even know they're there. They're so seductive that we get lost in

them, just living in them and acting them out, not aware that they're present. So the first step is really learning to recognize them when they arise, to recognize the telltale signs of doubt and aversion and the rest as well.

The reason this recognition is so important is that very often these hindrances come disguised. They come masquerading as something helpful, as something good, as something skillful. And if we are not on the ball, we believe that—we fall for their disguise. So this recognition is a very key point. We have to see them for what they are and not be deceived, because Mara is exceedingly ingenious. The mind can fool us in so many ways.

So, doubt. To begin with, it's helpful to understand that in English, the word doubt can actually refer to several different mindsets, one of which is skillful and another is not skillful, not helpful.

What's the skillful kind of doubt? That is the mind that inquires, that investigates, that doesn't just fall into dogmatic belief. The doubting mind in that sense is really helpful. It's like, "What is this? What is this experience? What is it about?" Not just assuming that we know or believing something without examination. That kind of doubt is good. Actually, the Buddha encouraged that kind of inquiry. He said, find out for yourselves what is helpful, what is skillful, what is useful. Don't just believe—don't believe what I say, don't believe what's in the books—really test it and see. So this is a good kind of doubt.

The unskillful doubt, the one which really is a hindrance, we might call skeptical doubt. This is the mind state of endless uncertainty or indecision. It's the opposite of being confident. It's like being at a crossroads and not knowing which way to go. The mind simply goes back and forth: Is it this way? Is it that way? Should I go this way? Should I go that way? And we don't go any place. In that way, doubt really stops us in our tracks.

Of all the five hindrances, skeptical doubt, when it's unnoticed, is the most harmful. It's the most dangerous because it has the power to bring our practice—and very often different aspects of our lives—to a standstill, unable to move forward. With all the other hindrances of desire and aversion and sleepiness and restlessness, we're still in the ballpark. We're kind of in the game. We're going through storms, but we're in there. When skeptical doubt is strong, we're not even in the game anymore. That's the power of it. This kind of doubt doesn't even give us the chance to take a wrong turn and then learn from our mistakes. We're just frozen through indecision, through uncertainty.

Some of you may have read the book or seen the movie *Life of Pi*. The book was by Yann Martel. There's a wonderful line in it which describes perfectly the debilitating power of doubt. He wrote, "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life

is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation." That's what doubt does.

Although all of us have some degree of confidence in the Buddha's teachings—or we wouldn't be here—doubt can still operate. Even when we have a fair confidence in the teachings, doubt can show itself in so many different ways.

It can take the form of doubt about the meditation practice itself. For all of us, at different times, difficulties are going to arise in our meditation. You've been here now, what, a full day, day and a half? Has anybody been here without any difficulty at all? Something or other—disturbances in the mind, or the body hurts, or something. Difficulties are part of the path. They're an inevitable part of the path. This is normal.

But when these difficulties arise, if they're not correctly understood, they can lead to doubting thoughts about what method of practice we're using. Different kinds of questions arise. Gina referred to a few of them this morning. "What am I doing here?" That's not an uncommon thought. "What does sitting here, watching my breath, or feeling the movement in a step, have anything to do with all the suffering that's in the world? What is the connection?" That kind of thought can easily arise.

Or we might start comparing practices. Many of you have probably done different practices of different kinds. "Maybe I should be doing Tibetan chanting. Or maybe Zen —Zen really has it. No sloppiness there. They get right to it. Or maybe Sufi dancing would definitely be more fun." As we're sitting, struggling with the different difficulties that come up in the practice, these doubting thoughts are not uncommon, where we start comparing and wondering.

Even within one tradition, even just within this tradition, doubting thoughts can arise. On one three-month retreat there was one yogi—this was the most extreme case in over forty years of teaching I've ever come across. For three months, this yogi could not make up his mind whether to do metta practice or vipassana practice. We tried everything. We said, "Well, just do vipassana." Okay, he would do it. But the next interview: "Oh, maybe I should do metta." "Okay, that would be great. Metta is a wonderful practice. Do metta." "No, maybe I should do vipassana." This went on for three months. It was an amazing manifestation of the doubting mind—just unable to unhook from that indecision.

Some people wonder, "Should I be feeling the breath at the abdomen or the nose? Well, no, the abdomen's better. Oh no, maybe it's better up here." That's the doubting mind. "Should I practice a narrow, focused awareness on the breath? Or should I practice an open, choiceless awareness? Should I be making a heroic effort? This is a rare opportunity—enlightenment or bust! Or should I relax? Should I really just take it easy? I've been working hard in my life."

Let me just chill out.

All of these questions, actually, in themselves are fine—each one of them. There's nothing wrong with any of those questions. It's when we get caught in the cycle of endless questioning, of endless doubt, never coming to a resolution, never resolving it for ourselves—that's when it becomes a problem. Because then we're not doing anything. We're not doing either one or the other.

So when we see this happening in the mind, it's important to recognize it, to label it, to note: "Oh, this is doubt"—so that we're not fooled by it. This is the doubting mind. And in that moment, we're becoming mindful of it rather than lost in it. And right there, the mind has become free.

Perhaps even more ingrained as a pattern than doubt about practices or doubt about particular techniques—even more deeply ingrained for many people—is the habit of self-doubt. We may have faith in the practice, in the technique, in the method, but we doubt ourselves. This could take the form of thoughts like, "Am I doing it right?" Or "I'm not doing it right." Or "I can't do it. It's too hard. It's not the right time. There are so many other things going on in my life." All of these thoughts arise, undermining us. We're doubting our capacity to do the practice.

Sometimes external situations can trigger self-doubt or even feelings of unworthiness, and these can be so easily triggered. It's amazing how sensitive the mind can be and how easily it can fall into that form of self-doubt.

During the three-month retreat, we put up the interview groups in four-day cycles, so people are seeing two different teachers every other day. There's a whole chart, and after each person's name—where there's the time and the day—there's a letter. After some people's names there was an A, some people B, some people C, some people D. I'm sure you can imagine: "Oh, there's a D after my name. That person has an A after their name." It can drive people into a tailspin. All that the letters represented were which day of the cycle people were being seen. A and C were Monday and Wednesday, B and D were Tuesday and Thursday. That's all the letter meant. But the mind has such a tendency to interpret without information.

This is just another extreme form of self-doubt, where we might feel unworthy. We personalize what's impersonal.

It's really important to pay attention to all these forms of doubt, but I think particularly to the different forms of self-doubt, because this can become a tremendous obstacle not only in our meditation practice but in our lives. If self-doubt is strong and unnoticed, it really becomes a debilitating force. It undermines us, continually holds us back. But it's just a thought pattern in the mind. We can actually see it and understand it and be free of it.

There's a very interesting phrase in English where we say someone is "plagued by doubt." That's an interesting phrase—plagued by doubt—because doubt is like a plague. That's the effect it has. Instead of allowing us to make the experiment, whatever it may be, whether in meditation or anything else in our lives, instead of allowing us just to dive in and make the experiment and see for ourselves whether the particular activity has value or doesn't—when self-doubt is there, or different kinds of doubt, we just get caught in endless speculation. We're caught in a standstill. We don't do anything.

These doubts then have a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because staying lost in self-doubt really is useless, and so it just keeps reaffirming itself: "Yeah, this is useless." And it is useless—because self-doubt doesn't allow us to move forward. It's likened to a thorn that keeps jabbing. And if there's a thorn that keeps jabbing, what happens? The mind gets irritable.

It gets discouraged. It gets dissatisfied. That's the effect doubt has in the mind.

Sometimes doubt comes from deeper feelings of unworthiness. This can be a deeply conditioned pattern for a whole variety of reasons in our lives where we don't feel worthy. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had some strikingly direct words about this. He was visiting IMS back in the 1970s, and somebody asked him a question about unworthiness and self-hatred. There wasn't even a word in Tibetan for that—it was so foreign to that culture. So he had to have it explained to him.

The question was: "I do not feel worthwhile as a person. How can I work on this as a beginning meditation student?" His answer was strikingly direct: "You should not be discouraged. Your feeling of 'I am of no value' is wrong, absolutely wrong. You are deceiving yourself." It was very striking because usually in his talks there's something very soft and gentle. But here it's just: that thought is a wrong thought—"I'm of no value."

Later, another Tibetan teacher, Tsoknyi Rinpoche—a contemporary teacher, younger, and very skilled with Westerners—was talking about this feeling of unworthiness that so many people feel. He made an interesting distinction, building on what the Dalai Lama said. He said the feeling is real because we actually feel it. It's real but not true. I thought that was a very good way of understanding it. We're not denying that the feeling is there, because we all do have it at different times. It may be part of our experience, this feeling of being unworthy or not good enough or self-doubt. So it's real, but it is not true, because we all have the potential for awakening, for liberation.

The Buddha highlighted the importance of working with these hindrances. I've been talking a lot about doubt, but this is true of all the hindrances. The Buddha spoke very directly about how important it is to bring mindfulness to them. He said that when we attend to the hindrances carelessly, they cause lack of vision, lack of knowledge, are detrimental to wisdom, tend to vexation, and lead away from Nibbāna, from enlightenment. He's saying if we don't attend to these mind states carefully, if we're careless about them in our meditation and in our lives, that has consequences—causing lack of vision, lack of knowledge, being detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation and upset, leading away from awakening.

Given all that, we may wonder: why is it that we get so caught up in them? If they have such a negative impact on our lives and our understanding, what is their seductive power?

If we take the first step of recognizing them when they arise—and this is essential—I would really suggest and encourage you in your practice throughout the whole day to keep an eye out for the arising of doubt, and the other hindrances as well. Really keep an eye out for their arising so you recognize them. "Oh, that's doubt. That's doubt." That's the first step.

The second step is then understanding why doubt is so seductive. Why do we believe it? We begin to see that the great allure of doubt is that it comes masquerading as wisdom. We hear this very wise-sounding voice in our minds. It sounds so reasonable and so valid and so true that we believe what it's saying. "What's the point of doing this? Maybe some other time. Aren't we already enlightened?" Or, "I'm so hopeless. I'm really hopeless. I can't do this. I'm the world's worst meditator." It's amazing how wise-sounding these voices can be, as if they're telling us the truth. So we have to be on the alert, not to be taken in by the masquerade of doubt as wisdom. We have to see it for what it is.

If we can learn to truly recognize doubt and not be fooled by it, right in that moment of seeing doubt as doubt—"Oh, this is a doubting thought"—right in that moment we're awake. Right in that moment we're aware. We see, at least for that moment, the empty, insubstantial nature of doubt. And that's tremendously liberating.

Perhaps at first we just see it for a few moments, and then we're caught again. But if we keep practicing seeing doubt as doubt, we can really free our minds from this particular pattern. And it's tremendously enlivening—not only of our meditation, but of our entire lives.

Another state that is very powerfully conditioned in our lives is aversion. We experience aversion in a wide variety of ways; it has many flavors: anger, hatred, annoyance, irritation, fear, ill will, the judging mind. All of these are just different manifestations of aversion, and they're all conditioned reactions to what we find unpleasant. Something unpleasant comes, and our conditioned reaction, in one way or another, is to feel aversion to it. This is the habit pattern.

But as with doubt, we can learn to recognize this response. We can investigate the nature of each of these mind states—anger, hatred, fear, ill will, annoyance—and see why they have such a hold on our minds.

Aversion arises in some pretty predictable ways. One of the most obvious is that it arises very easily with regard to physical pain. We're sitting or moving about or just going through our lives, and there's pain in the body. It's a rare individual who will say, "Oh good!" Maybe now, after a few days of practice, you can do that, but mostly the conditioned reaction is, "I don't like this." We feel the contraction, the pushing away, the aversion, the dislike—sometimes even hatred.

We can notice the aversion even if we don't catch it immediately as a mind state. The signal that it's there is when you feel that contraction of the body in response to pain. Don't you feel that? There's some kind of pain, and whether on an obvious or subtle level, it's like we tense against it. We don't want to let it in. We don't want to experience it, to feel it. That's an indication of the aversion in the mind—not liking it.

Here's one little meditative hint. What I'm about to say can save you lifetimes of suffering: When you're struggling—whether it's in meditation or in anything else—struggle means one thing. Struggle means that something is going on that, in that moment, you're not accepting. Because if you were accepting it, you wouldn't be struggling.

Now, you don't want to misinterpret this. Acceptance does not mean not doing anything about it. Acceptance means we're there and we are connecting with what's happening in an open way. We're actually feeling it, experiencing it, and then seeing what should be done about it.

But the sense of struggle itself—and this comes up so frequently in meditation—when you're sitting or even walking and you feel like you're struggling in your practice, take a look. Just settle back and ask yourself the question: "Okay, what is it that I'm not open to?" It might be a physical pain. It might be a certain unpleasant emotion. It might be the fact that your mind is wandering a lot. The mind is struggling because it's not accepting.

There's a youngish Burmese teacher who's become quite popular in the West in these last years. His name is Sayadaw Tejaniya, and he has a very down-to-earth and common-sense approach to meditation.

He says, you have to accept and watch both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. You only want pleasant experiences. You don't want even the tiniest unpleasant experience. Is this fair? Is this the way of the Dharma?

He's simply pointing out that life consists of pleasant and unpleasant. And our practice—and it needs practice, we need to practice it—is being willing to open to both. Because otherwise we're in a place of struggle, otherwise we're reinforcing and strengthening the pattern of aversion, of anger, of hatred, of dislike, of irritation, of annoyance.

Working with physical pain in the body takes practice. When I first started sitting, when I first went on retreat—this was a million years ago—I couldn't sit for five minutes cross-legged. The pain was so intense, I didn't have any concentration, and I was struggling a lot. It took a long time to really settle in, and slowly the ability to be with unpleasantness grew over time. There's still a lot more to do as well. So you want to understand it as a practice, but as an essential practice. This is part of what we're doing here.

We can see aversion arise very clearly with respect to physical pain. We can also see different forms of aversion arise when we think about unpleasant situations or things that have happened in the past—some event. We think about it and then we get angry or annoyed or irritated. This is common. You're just sitting here minding your own business, feeling your breath, and then all of a sudden you remember something that was difficult. The aversion is there, the anger is there, the ill will is there.

What's really happening in that moment? We're getting angry at a thought. We're not in the situation. What's happening is a thought is arising, and we're getting angry at the thought.

My first teacher, Munindraji, had a wonderful line. He said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother. It's a thought." The thought of anything is not the thing—it's a thought. This is not to say that thoughts aren't useful. We use them, and we can use them skillfully, and we need to. But we want to understand what they are.

We can also get angry at imagining things in the future that haven't happened. I had the most interesting example of this quite a few years ago. We were about to have a board of directors meeting, and there was some contentious issue. I was president of our board for a while. It was just one of those meetings where I knew there was going to be some disagreement.

I was walking the loop, just going for a walk, and I was anticipating this discussion. So I would have this thought in my mind, and it was so amazing—just the thought of the anticipated discussion, and in that moment, anger arose in my mind. It was so surprising to me. What's going on here? How did this happen? I kept purposely having the thought just to watch the anger arise, because it was fascinating—just this connection between thought and emotion. What's going on in our systems, that a thought can trigger a very strong emotion in the moment? It's really interesting to watch that and to see how in many cases we are getting angry or upset about things that have not even happened. We're just thinking they might happen.

In talking about all this, it's also extremely important—and I know you know this very well—to understand that powerful emotions can sometimes be conveying very important information for us. It's not to say that we shouldn't be having them. That's not what this is about.

Because sometimes there may be a strong feeling of anger or outrage at injustice or oppression, or about situations in our lives where boundaries need to be set in some way. Sometimes these strong emotions are actually conveying important information for us. We want to understand that, but can we be mindful enough of our experience, mindful enough of the emotion, so that we see it, we take the information, but are not overwhelmed—we don't drown in the emotion—so that we can actually act effectively, in a way that's not harmful to either ourselves or others?

There's a lot of subtlety in understanding this particular hindrance of aversion or anger, and in seeing those situations when there's something we need to pay attention to, but then using the energy of it skillfully, wisely, and compassionately.

So there's a lot here. You think you're just sitting here—in, out, in, out—but really sitting here, it's your whole life. Your whole life is manifesting. The life of your body, the life of your heart, the life of your mind. And the beauty of a retreat is you have nothing else to do except to observe it all. What a gift. It is a real privilege in this world to have the time to be doing just this, to be understanding these elements of ourselves and our lives in such a careful way.

We can get annoyed or irritated by the littlest things on retreat. If we're going through a difficult time and feeling grumpy or discouraged, the smallest thing that somebody else does can irritate us no end.

There are two opposing patterns that often arise on retreat. On the one side, there's often the Vipassana romance, where people fall in love with somebody. They don't even know them. They haven't spoken to them. But already in your mind, you're married. You have kids. The other side of that is the Vipassana vendetta, where there's one person or more on the retreat who just drives you crazy. You don't like the way they walk, you don't like anything. Whatever they do, you get irritated. Again, you don't know them, you haven't spoken a word to them. It's all a projection of one's own mind. But it happens. And this is a good example not to get caught by these patterns, but to say, "Oh, that's aversion, that's ill will." We begin to see and understand it so we're not identified with it. We see it as just a passing thought in the mind. We really can free ourselves.

I hadn't planned to talk about this, but here's one little exercise you could do that ties into working with this kind of aversion. When I was on retreat—I'd done many retreats here as a yogi—on one retreat I noticed that every time I walked into the dining room for a meal, my mind would have a comment about every single person. Mostly judgmental. Whatever. It was ridiculous. Totally ridiculous. But that's what the mind was doing.

Then I realized that all of those aversive-type thoughts were being triggered because I wasn't being mindful that I was seeing. All of those thoughts came from seeing different people. So what I decided to do was that every time I went into the dining room, all I would note was "seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing." I was just staying very mindful of the bare seeing. Those judgments all disappeared. It was amazing. Something that felt like such a strong habit pattern of mine—as soon as I saw what the cause was, what was feeding them, they vanished. This is what we can explore. We actually can free our minds from these patterns that cause so much suffering, either big or small, to ourselves and others.

So a question arises: after we learn to recognize the various forms aversion takes for us—and they're quite individualized, we have to see each one for ourselves—what form does our aversion take? But then it gets interesting to ask the same question as we did with doubt: Why is it so seductive? It doesn't feel good to be angry or to be filled with ill will or judgment. So why are we seduced by it again and again?

One of the great seductions of anger and ill will—not in every case, but this is one of the big ones—is the very sweet feeling of being right. We justify the anger to ourselves because we feel right. "Look at what that person is doing." And we're so caught up in our own sense of rightness.

The Buddha described it so beautifully. He said anger has its poisoned source and honeyed tip. It does have that honeyed tip. When we're feeling kind of self-righteous in our anger, we feel energized by that. But we're not seeing the suffering of the source. When we're filled with anger, even though we're justifying it to ourselves by that honeyed tip, by being or feeling right, we're missing the fact that we're the ones who are suffering. It's like holding on to a hot burning coal.

My first teacher, Munindraji, would often give three-hour dharma talks, and I hated them. So I am very conscious—there's definitely another hour here. So I'm going to wrap this up.

One of the things we need to be watchful of as we're working with aversion is first to see how we can feed it by this feeling of being right, justifying it to ourselves and missing the suffering that's really there. Another way we feed the aversion in us is by having aversion to it. If we're judging the anger, judging the ill will, or having aversion towards the aversion, it's not a very effective strategy, because we're just feeding it, just strengthening it. We have to really become aware of our attitude about the aversion when it arises.

And remember, aversion can take many forms—anger, hatred, fear, irritation, annoyance. It's a whole range. What's our attitude towards these feelings? If you hate these feelings, if you have aversion to them, if you want to get rid of them, you are strengthening them. So you need to check the attitude as these feelings come up. "Oh, fear feels like this." You want to be investigating it. "Anger—oh, this feels like this. This is what it's like. Rage feels like this." We're not condemning it and we're not identifying with it. We're just exploring its nature. And in that, we begin to see its very impermanent nature. It's there out of certain conditions, and it passes away.

I want to read something from Thich Nhat Hanh. The Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist writes so beautifully. He says, "The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don't suppress it, we don't run away from it, we just breathe and hold our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. The anger is no longer alone, it is with our mindfulness. If you keep breathing, mindfulness particles will infiltrate the anger. If you keep shining your compassion and understanding on it, your anger will soon crack and you will be able to look into its depths and see its roots."

That's how we have to hold it, and that's how we can come to understand it.

We'll be talking more about this in our meditation practice and exploring the other hindrances, but I hope you have some sense of how important it is to really be open to and understand and investigate these powerful tendencies of mind. Because if we don't, then we're just acting them out in our lives. And it causes a lot of trouble and suffering for ourselves and for others.

But when we can be mindful of them—they're going to come, these are universal forces in the mind—when we can be mindful of them, they actually become the path to our awakening. And that's really what our practice is about.

CHAPTER 4

# Liberation through Non-Clinging

Joseph Goldstein · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk from a People of Color Retreat, Joseph Goldstein illuminates the Buddha's central teaching that liberation comes through non-clinging. Drawing from the Pāli texts where the Buddha declared "the supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathāgata, namely liberation through non-clinging," Goldstein emphasizes that non-clinging is not some distant goal but our practice in each present moment.*
>
> *The talk explores practical methods for realizing non-clinging, beginning with refining our perception of anicca (impermanence). Goldstein references Suzuki Roshi's distillation of Buddhism into two words—"everything changes"—and guides practitioners through direct experiments with sound and awareness to verify the Buddha's teaching that when we truly see impermanence, the mind naturally doesn't cling, and when it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. He examines the four primary arenas of clinging: sense pleasures, meditative states, views and opinions, and most subtly, the concept of self.*
>
> *The exploration of anattā (selflessness) is particularly rich, examining how we construct a sense of self through identification with body, thoughts, emotions, and consciousness itself. Goldstein offers several practical techniques for cutting through this identification, including reframing experience in the passive voice ("sensations being known" rather than "I am knowing"), observing the pairwise arising and passing of knowing and objects, and the Zen practice of looking for the mind. He concludes with the Buddha's declaration: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Whoever hears this has heard all the teachings."*

As most of you know, the word or term Buddha means "awakened one," and for many of us this actually is the goal of our practice—to awaken from the sleep or the dream of ignorance, of delusion.

We each get a glimpse of this every morning when we wake up, either from a deep sleep or a dream state. Near that moment of awakening, we feel somewhat more connected, somewhat more in the real world. But the Buddha pointed out that even in this relatively awakened state, we're actually still asleep—caught up in the habit patterns of our minds, the habit patterns of thoughts, of emotions.

I'm sure you've noticed over these past days of the retreat how much of the time we're lost in these trains of association, of thoughts, of memories, of plans, of images. What's so interesting is that we hop on these trains, we don't know that we've hopped

on, and we actually have no idea where the train is going. Sometime down the track, it's like we awaken again from being lost. We hop off the train and are again attentive, again aware.

So the question for us in our practice and in our lives really is how we can truly wake up. Not just waking up from our nighttime sleep, but waking up from our daytime sleep. What is it that actually will free the mind and the heart?

All the various Buddhist traditions actually agree or converge in one understanding of what frees the mind. There are lots of different techniques and lots of different methods and even lots of different metaphysical, philosophical explanations of things. But all the traditions converge in one understanding of the nature of freedom.

In the Pali texts, which are the texts of this tradition, the Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata"—and that's the word he used to refer to himself, the Tathagata—"namely, liberation through non-clinging." And someplace else he said, "This is the deathless, namely liberation through non-clinging."

These same truths of liberation are expressed also in the Mahayana and the Tibetan traditions. There was a great Indian adept and sage, Tilopa, who in teaching his disciple Naropa said, "You are not fettered, you are not bound by appearances. You are fettered, you are bound by attachments, so cut your attachments." It's the same message.

What's been very important in my own practice, and I think for all of us to realize, is that non-clinging shouldn't be thought of as some far-off state. We'll practice ten years or twenty years or fifty years and maybe someday I'll experience non-clinging? The great realization is that this is our practice now. What we're practicing in the moment is non-clinging. All the teachings of concentration, of mindfulness, of the precepts, of metta, of the brahmaviharas—all of the teachings really are in the service of this quality of freedom, of non-clinging.

As you've noticed, our unfolding experience is continually changing—different sensations, sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant. The practice of liberation is the same. What's very hard to remember, even after many years of practice, is that we're not practicing for some other better experience. What we're practicing is the mind that is not clinging now.

But we get seduced even in the path of our meditation. How often are we sitting or walking, practicing in order for some other better, more wonderful state to arise? And we forget what the essence, what the very heart of freedom is. Freedom is in the non-grasping mind.

There's a little saying that I made up. It's not in very good English, but it conveys something: "It doesn't matter to what you don't cling." It's so interesting. How often are we practicing for some experience in the future that we won't cling to? Why not not cling now to whatever it is that's arising?

So how do we do this? The message is clear, very unambiguous. The Buddha just put it out in a very straightforward way. The question is how do we accomplish this? How do we practice this non-clinging now?

One way, and this is a very great doorway into not clinging, is through refining our awareness and our perception of impermanence, of change. Someone once asked Suzuki Roshi, who was a great Japanese Zen master who started the San Francisco Zen Center—years ago the collection of his teachings was in a book called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which back in the sixties or seventies was really a Buddhist bestseller, because it just encapsulated so much of his wisdom.

So there's a story that someone once asked him, a student who said, "I've been listening to your talks for years, but I just don't understand. Could you please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?"

And Suzuki Roshi replied, "Everything changes."

The implication of this statement is enormous. But what's so interesting is that we all know this. We know it intellectually. We know it conceptually. There's nobody who would argue the point that everything changes. And yet, we haven't integrated that understanding fully in our lives, in the way we're relating to experience. Because if we really knew it, if it was in our bones, then we would not be clinging or attached to anything. We would know that everything is changing. So we have to practice seeing it and refining our perception of it.

As Dara mentioned in her beautiful talk last night, the most basic framework or principle in the Buddhist teachings is that all things, all experience, arises out of conditions, and that the conditions are continually changing. Every aspect of our lives, every part of our experience is arising because the causes and conditions are there for that particular experience to arise. But we have to pay attention to the fact that those very causes and conditions which cause something to arise are continually shifting and changing—they're not stable.

So many times people have been leading peaceful, seemingly stable lives, and then in a moment conditions can change. We read of great natural disasters, all the stories both recent and long-standing of senseless violence, or accidents. You're going along

and in a moment your life is changed. Disease. What's so crucial for us to understand is that none of us is exempt from this law of change. We tend to be able to see, "Oh yeah, it's changing for everybody else, but my life is stable." And this is the great delusion.

There's a story in the Mahabharata, one of the great Indian classics, where one of the characters, a wise sage, comments that the most remarkable thing in the world is that we see people dying all around us and yet we don't think it will happen to us. And of course, again, we know it will intellectually, but do we really get it? Do we really understand the impermanent nature of everything? Conditions are always changing.

Another one of my homegrown mantras, which has really served me very well: anything can happen anytime. We think we know how things are going to unfold, but really, anything can happen anytime. At first people might hear that and feel, "Oh, that would make me kind of paranoid, always on the watch for what might happen." But for me, it's exactly the opposite. By recognizing that anything can happen anytime, my heart became a lot less defensive about things happening, as changes occurred, particularly ones that were unwanted or unpleasant. Yes, anything can happen anytime. This is the law. This is the nature of things. So it actually created a sense of ease. It created a sense of the acceptance that Dara was speaking about in terms of the first noble truth.

The experience of change, or attention to it, can also come not only with big dramatic events or changes in our lives, but also just in the ordinary experiences that we have. I don't know if some of you have walked on the paths in the woods. The New England woods are amazing. We see miles and miles of these stone walls and stone foundations, empty foundations of old houses. It's not hard to imagine the people who lived there and created those walls and built those houses—their lives were as vivid and as compelling to them as our own lives are to us. And yet, what's left now? Stone walls in the woods.

The truth of change, the truth of impermanence, is so obvious in so much all around us. There are changes in nature, changes of weather, the changes in climate, the huge climatic changes that are happening now. We see the changing nature of our relationships. How much suffering have we been involved in because we have some idea that our relationship should stay a certain way? And of course it's impossible.

We're all changing. We're changing, our partners are changing, all our relationships are changing. We can see this change again in a very ordinary way, just in our own bodies and minds—and of course, that's what we're doing here in practice.

In your meditation, how many times have you had this experience? I've had it happen countless times: I would have a sitting that was very calm and concentrated, my mind pretty still. I'd get up, and then I'd come into the next sitting thinking it would just pick up from where it left off. But the next sitting might be filled with pain or discomfort or restlessness. Or the other way around—you have a really difficult sitting and come into the next one with a sense of dread, and you sit down and the mind settles.

There are examples of this process of change happening all around us, when we are paying attention carefully. I think I'll interject something here. This is something I usually suggest at the very beginning of a retreat, but it's not too late.

There's a meditative disease, and it's called "more or less mindful." We're going along through the day and we're more or less mindful. We're kind of there. We're not totally lost, but we're not really there. We're not there carefully. We're not there with precision. That's the kind of mindfulness we need to cultivate, and that's what can be cultivated so well on retreat, because you have nothing else to do. There are no excuses. Your only job is to pay careful attention. So watch the quality of your mindfulness through the day. Do you find yourself rushing from one activity to another? Rushing is great feedback that your mind is ahead of yourself—we're not settled back in our body, not really present.

Things are changing not only every week or every day or every hour. Things are actually changing every single moment. Things are disappearing and new things are arising moment after moment. And we can see that. We see it in a simple way—you don't have to be a super yogi to notice this.

So here's an experiment you can make, and this is going to be a memory test to see if you can remember this from now till the end of the talk. Because it's an experiment to make when you leave the hall. Finish the talk, ring the bell, and just as you leave, if you remember: pay attention, moment to moment, to all the changing experiences you have simply in getting up from your seat and leaving. All the changes of body sensations, the changes of what is being seen—the different colors and forms and shapes—the different sounds that come and go as people are leaving, the passing thoughts moving through.

If you're not in a "more or less mindful" state but really in a very attentive state, you will notice just in that short time how many different experiences are arising and passing away. And all of this is ordinary. This is not some big mystical experience. It's just the nature of things. It's how things are always happening.

Even with something we think of as unitary, within each of those experiences so many different things are happening. What just arose? A sound. We might think, "Oh yeah, a sound arose and passed away." But if we're listening carefully—how many different vibratory elements are within that one sound? How many changes are taking place just within that one sound?

And it's the same with each breath. We think, "Oh, in-breath, out-breath." And after a while, we get bored with it. First, it's interesting that we get bored with it. Would we be bored if somebody were holding our head underwater? We would not be bored with our breath. Each breath is literally sustaining our lives. This is not poetry.

Every single breath is sustaining our life. Oh, how boring. The mind is so amazing. It's because we're not paying careful attention. Fritz Perls, the great psychologist, said that boredom is lack of attention. It's when we're half-hearted, when we're not close. And so when we come in close to experience—whether it's listening to a sound or the breath or a step or whatever it is—then the truth of change, the truth of impermanence is so obvious. We begin to see it in such a clear and precise way.

It's through the seeing of impermanence on this level, seeing it repeatedly and reflecting on it, really keeping it in mind—this is what loosens the grip of clinging and attachment, because we see that there's nothing we can really hold on to.

The liberating power of this perception of change was expressed in one very startling teaching of the Buddha. This is a statement that, if you think about it, is really quite shocking. He said it's better to live a single day seeing the momentary arising and passing of phenomena—seeing how experiences arise and pass away very quickly—better to live a single day seeing this than to live a hundred years without seeing it.

What is that saying about what we value in our lives and what we give energy to? It's pretty remarkable. But what the Buddha is pointing to is that the seeing of impermanence on this level is what liberates us. It's not just the accumulation of more experiences or more pleasant things in our lives, which is mostly, to a large extent, what we devote ourselves to. The Buddha is saying it's this seeing of impermanence that actually frees us.

So it's worth testing. It's not something necessarily to believe, but can we practice and test it for ourselves?

The Buddha gave very explicit instructions about this. He said, whatever feelings arise—whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and these feelings are arising with every single experience, every sight, sound, smell, everything we experience, tasting it

as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—whatever feelings arise, abide contemplating impermanence in those feelings. Contemplate the passing away, the letting go of those feelings.

Here's the key point: contemplating thus, we do not cling to anything in this world. Contemplating the impermanence of these feelings of experience—contemplating thus, we do not cling to anything in this world. When we don't cling, there is no agitation. When not agitated, we personally attain Nibbana, enlightenment.

I had read that particular teaching many, many times, and I always took it as a description of how things were. Then on one retreat I read it again—and this is why reading over and over again the teachings matters, because each time you get another perspective. On this retreat I read it, and instead of just reading it as a description, I took it as an instruction, an instruction of investigation. The Buddha is saying that when we're seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. So I decided to test it out, just watching for those times when I was seeing impermanence and noticing whether the mind is clinging.

We can do this right now. As I ring the bell—this is not hard to do—just listen and see if you can become aware, which again is really simple, of the impermanent nature of the sound, the flow-like nature. And as you're hearing the sound and are aware of its impermanence, its change, just turn the attention and see in those moments whether the mind is clinging or not. We're going to test the Buddha and see if he was right.

It's actually impossible to cling when you are right in the flow of the changes.

Then I took it a step further. He said when we see impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. So is that true? Let's try again. Seeing impermanence. No clinging. In no clinging, is there agitation? No. The mind settles easily into this place of non-agitation.

And then comes the great conclusion: when not agitated, we personally attain Nibbana. It's like this is the shortcut. It's all right here in a few simple steps. Seeing impermanence, mind doesn't cling. When not clinging, mind is not agitated. Not agitated—Nibbana.

But we have to see it. We have to see it in ourselves, and it's not hard to do. That's the point. We just have to take it from being Buddhist philosophy to an instruction for how we can look, how we can experience. And it's very simple.

We can also play with it in the reverse way. When we feel that we are agitated—when we're going through a sitting or just moving through our day and the mind is agitated—that can be feedback for us. The mind is agitated, which means I'm clinging to something. Because if the mind's not clinging, it's not agitated. So if it is agitated, it means we're clinging.

Instead of the agitation being a problem, something we struggle with, it becomes feedback, a wake-up call. Mind is agitated—take a look. Are we clinging to some thought, some feeling, some opinion? And that's how we actually, over time, free ourselves from the patterns of clinging and attachment.

In case we're still missing it, in case we still haven't quite honed in, as a great help to us the Buddha pointed out those areas where we habitually do cling. In case there's some confusion about where we're going to find this clinging—and this is what I love about the teachings—it's just very explicit.

He talked about different areas of clinging which most people get involved in one way or another. And of course the first and most obvious is the clinging to sense pleasures. We enjoy them. We like them. We want them to continue. We devote a lot of our lives to acquiring sense pleasures—good food, nice feelings in the body. Of course, the problem is that these sense pleasures, while there's nothing wrong with them, don't last. So they're not going to actually provide a lasting peace.

It's just a question of looking to see: are we getting agitated in our relationship to sense pleasures through clinging? Or can we simply be in our lives, enjoy them when they're present, but without devoting our lives to their acquisition?

Sense desires—this is not a trivial thing. When Dara spoke of the second noble truth being craving, that understanding itself is quite extraordinary. Of all the things the Buddha could have said was the cause of suffering—craving. Of all the mindsets, it's that craving, that desire. And one of the things we desire is sense pleasures.

I had a ridiculous experience of this, and I've told this story over the years many times. It happened years ago, but it was so ridiculous that it stayed with me. I'd been in India for a couple of years—this is many years ago, forty-five years ago or so. I was young, enthusiastic about my practice, really into it. I'd been there long enough that my mind had developed some degree of concentration and stillness.

At different times, I would be having a sitting—that kind of sitting where you think you're going to get enlightened any minute. So I'm sitting there, just waiting for the big moment. We were staying in the Burmese temple in Bodh Gaya, just the few Westerners

who were practicing there. The conditions were very basic, and the food was very basic. In the evening, they served just a couple of chapati and two really small bananas, about that big.

So I'm sitting, about to get enlightened. The tea bell rings, and I watched my mind: Enlightenment? Banana? Enlightenment or banana? And what's so amazing is that I got up for the banana.

So craving—don't underestimate the force of this in the mind. It goes really deep.

In addition to sense pleasures, on a more refined level, we also get attached and cling to pleasant meditative states. At first, most people go through a lot of difficulty and struggle, but at a certain point the body gets more easeful and the mind can get concentrated, and we can experience many deeply pleasant meditative states of calm, of peace, of joy, of lightness—lots of beautiful states. It becomes very easy to start practicing for them. We become attached to them.

And there's a very interesting description: at a particular place in our practice, all of the different factors of enlightenment, factors of awakening—like mindfulness and rapture and tranquility, all of the really beautiful things that we're practicing for—at a particular stage in practice, they are called corruptions of insight. Not because the states themselves are bad, but because at that particular point in practice we're so enamored of them that we get attached to the states and we forget about liberation through non-clinging. Liberation is not in those states. Liberation is in the mind that doesn't cling. So that's another arena to pay attention to.

There's a Thai laywoman from the last century who was probably the most famous lay teacher in Thailand of that time, and very unusual—in that culture, for a lay woman to be a teacher is not usual because of the big monastic hierarchy. But she was this extraordinary woman who just created a very small hermitage, and still as a layperson, devoted her life to practice. Her name was Upasika Kee. There's a book of her teachings called *Pure and Simple*, which is a wonderful book. If at some point you have a chance to read it, the teachings are powerfully direct, and they're all about freedom. They're all about liberation.

I just want to read one small part. She said, "If you want to see the real essence of the Dhamma, we have to look deeply, profoundly. Then it's simply a matter of letting go all along the way. The theme of non-clinging covers everything from beginning to end."

The whole book is really just an elaboration of that. We have to look deeply and profoundly—not more or less mindfully, but really connected in each moment, seeing the impermanence, the flow. Then it's simply a matter of letting go all along the way. The

theme of non-clinging covers everything from beginning to end. We want to take this in, because this can really inform our understanding of the teachings and of our own practice.

So there is attachment to sense pleasures or to meditative pleasures. We can also become attached—and often do—to our views and opinions about things. I have another little mantra: certainty is not an indication of truth. Just because we have an opinion and are certain about it, the certainty doesn't make it true.

It's really interesting, just as we examine our own minds and in listening to other people, especially in this election year, to see the difference—especially in ourselves—between an opinion and what we really know. Because it's quite amazing how we can be attached to an opinion about things we know nothing about, but it doesn't stop us from having an opinion. It's just to see that. It's not an insignificant thing.

And even about things we really do know, where we really do have some experience of it, I find that it's really helpful to keep an open mind, not to be attached even to what we might really feel we do know. Because if we're not attached to it, it just leaves us open to further discovery or different perspectives. It allows our life to unfold.

So this attachment to sense pleasures, to meditative pleasures, attachment to views and opinions—the deepest attachment we have, and really the source, you could say the ultimate source or a deep source of so much suffering in the world, is attachment to the idea, the concept of self, of "I."

And of course this is probably the most difficult aspect of the Buddhist teachings to understand. It's so counterintuitive, because we live our lives revolving about, centered in, this sense of ourselves—as if there's some being, some reference point to whom all experience is happening. I'm the one who's hearing, and I'm the one who's seeing, and I'm the one who's thinking. Our whole life revolves around this mental construct of the reference point of self, of "I."

This takes a lot of just sitting with it. First, listening and hearing about it, because it's difficult to understand. But through the meditation practice and our Dharma practice, we can begin to get some glimpses of what this might mean.

And this is so fundamental to the Buddhist teaching: this constructed reference point of self, of "I," happens when we are not paying careful attention to the composite, impermanent nature of experience. In this flow of rapidly changing phenomena in the mind, in the body, when we're not paying careful attention—as Upasika Kee said, pro-

found attention—in this rapid flow of phenomena, of physical, mental experience, we identify with various aspects of that experience, just unconsciously. We identify with it as being self.

I'll just give you examples of how we do this, and we do it most of the time. Most of us are very identified with our bodies. Who am I? We wake up in the morning, look in the mirror—yeah, that's me.

We take the body to be self. There was once an advertisement in the New York Times for a t-shirt that said, "Me, me, me." I want to do an IMS t-shirt that says, "Not me, not me, not me."

But especially these days, with medical technology, we have a whole window into a different perspective. I had a friend who had laparoscopic surgery for a benign tumor. They go in with a little video camera—it's amazing how they do it. After the surgery, she actually came out with the video. She had no interest in looking at it, but I did. It was extraordinary. It was like a journey without going to an autopsy, like being on the inside of the body. You saw the organs and the blood and everything that's in there.

From that view, would you identify with your liver? "Yes, the liver is me." Or the gallbladder—"Yeah, that's who I am. I'm the gallbladder." No, when you see what's actually in there, you're not likely to identify with it. But we wrap it all nicely in skin, make this nice package, and then we get attached. We get attached to this body, get very attached to other people's bodies, because we're not seeing deeply.

So that's one thing we can begin to explore: how we're creating the sense of self through identification with this body by not really understanding or seeing what the body actually is.

We create a sense of self when we're lost in and identified with thoughts. Just in these last days, countless hours being carried away in thought trains. I'm thinking, I'm planning, I'm judging. We identify with the thought. The thought itself is not a problem—it's just like a little bubble in the mind. My first teacher, Munindra-ji, used to say, "The thought is the thinker." It's not that there's someone who's having the thought. The thought is a mental phenomenon rising out of conditions. It does its thing, which is to think, and then passes away. But we claim it because we're not paying attention, we're not seeing its impermanent nature. The thoughts come in and unconsciously we become identified with them, creating the sense of self in that.

We create the sense of self when we're identified with the different emotions that arise, with all the stories we make up about ourselves. "I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm excited, I'm enthusiastic, I'm depressed." The "I" is extra. All of these emotions are

conditioned experiences arising out of causes and conditions, just like cloud formations. Conditions come together, the cloud forms. Conditions change, the clouds dissolve. Conditions come together internally, externally, and an emotion arises. Conditions change, the emotion passes.

But because we're not seeing that clearly, how often are we identified in, lost in, and sometimes overwhelmed by the emotions? Because we think, "Yes, this is me, this is who I am." So not only do we go, "I'm angry" or "I'm sad" or "I'm happy," we then create an even bigger structure: "I'm an angry person," or "I'm a fearful person," or "I'm a happy person." We're building a superstructure of self on top of momentary changing conditions. We can observe this now as we're watching our own process.

The most subtle level of identification—the one that's hardest to see in terms of how we create and feed and strengthen the sense of self—is our identification with consciousness, with awareness itself. We may see all these other experiences are changing. The body we may see is changing, and even as we get more skilled, we see thoughts and emotions as changing. But "I'm the one who's knowing it all." In that identification with the knowing, we create that separate sense of the witness, the observer of experience, apart from experience.

Here we really need a lot of interest and practice to begin to understand the very nature and process of consciousness itself.

What is knowing? This is a great mystery.

Before I just touch on a couple of ways that we might cut through this identification with knowing, I want to emphasize that in understanding on a deeper and deeper level that the sense of self is a construct, it doesn't mean that in that realization or understanding—as we understand selflessness—we disappear somehow. There's no magic trick. On a conventional level, we are operating from that space. I'm speaking to you. I buy clothes that fit me, not fit you. There's understanding. On the conventional level, we're using this concept, so there's no problem with that.

This was expressed very well by a Tibetan teacher when he was asked about this. He said, "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. You are real. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerated."

I love that. On the conventional level, we are real, and we live our lives in that place, and that's fine. But we want to get to that place of understanding that we're not *really* real—that underneath all of that, there's no substantial, self-existing thing living inside.

This is profound. This is a revolutionary way of understanding life and who we are. That's why the Buddha's enlightenment was such an extraordinary awakening. It was an extraordinary realization.

So how can we cut through this most subtle identification with knowing? How do we let go of the sense of being the knower, the observer?

One technique which I worked with in my practice, which I found very effective, was simply changing the way I was languaging experience to myself. Usually, the way we language experience in English, grammatically we're using the active voice: I'm walking, I'm thinking, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. There's a subject, a verb, an object. In my practice—especially in walking—I started reframing it in the passive voice. While walking and just feeling the sensations, I began to frame it as "sensations being known." Instead of "I'm knowing the sensations," which right in the language creates the sense of self, changing to the passive voice: "Sensations are being known."

Let's use the bell again. *The sound being known.* In that framing, we're not creating, in our very language, the sense of self. It's just experience being known.

The great philosopher Wittgenstein said, "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." Language is powerful. Language conditions how we experience things. And so just a simple shift of language can give us a different perspective.

I'd suggest, if you're interested, when you do some walking, just keep it very simple. Walk, and "movement is being known." The sensations of the movement are being known. Notice how effortlessly that knowing is happening—and that it's not that anyone is doing it. It's being known quite spontaneously.

Another way of cutting through the identification with knowing is very classic—this is classic vipassanā teachings. It's realizing that in every moment of experience, two things are happening: there's knowing and an object. There's knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, knowing of a thought, knowing of an emotion. Our life, our experience, is really a pairwise progression: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

When you're paying careful attention to the moment-to-moment unfolding of experience, just take a look at that. See how in every moment there's what's being known and the knowing of it. As our mind gets more and more tuned to that, we begin to see that the knowing itself is arising and passing along with the object. We're seeing the impermanent nature of consciousness.

Knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object—arising and passing away. This perception also cuts through identification, offering yet another doorway.

There's another approach found extensively in the Zen and Tibetan traditions, a very powerful teaching. The instruction is actually to look for your mind, to look for the knowing. Things are being known—known by what? You take a look. Can you find what is knowing it? What's really interesting is that no matter how hard you look, there's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening. This is the great mystery of consciousness, of awareness.

There's a book about the history of the number zero, and the title is *The Nothing That Is*. I saw that title and simply had to get the book. I could only understand the first paragraph, really. But that was enough—everything I needed was right there. In the opening lines, the book says: look at zero and you see nothing; look through it and you see the world. What a beautiful expression of the nature of mind, the nature of awareness. Look at zero, look at awareness—you see nothing. Look through it and you see the world. This offers another way of exploration.

One last story, a famous one. This is a Zen encounter between Bodhidharma and the person who would eventually become his disciple. When you listen to this story, it has a kind of Zen witticism to it, and people often respond to that witty aspect. But it's actually profound. So suppress the laugh and really listen—you could get enlightened hearing this.

Bodhidharma, as you may know, brought Buddhism from India to China. He was a fierce teacher, sitting in a cave supposedly for nine years, facing a wall. This seeker comes to him, very upset, suffering tremendously, genuinely searching. He entreats Bodhidharma: please help me pacify my mind. At first Bodhidharma ignores him, but finally he emerges and engages. The man says, "I've been suffering tremendously"—and this was deep, profound suffering—"Please, please pacify my mind." Bodhidharma responds: "Show me your mind. Present me your mind." The seeker says, "I've looked for it everywhere and I can't find it." And Bodhidharma replies: "There—it's already pacified."

That is an amazing teaching, one that can actually be applied. I've done this even while going for a walk. If my mind is caught up in something, a little disturbed, I'll remember that exchange: look for the mind, there's nothing to find. There—it's already pacified in the awareness that there's nothing to find. It's like that earlier teaching: no clinging, no agitation, Nibbāna. This offers a very direct way of simply looking for the mind. The not-finding is the finding.

So again, all of these are different approaches to liberation through non-clinging. We accomplish this through seeing impermanence, through exploring those arenas where we actually do cling, through the direct experience of selflessness—recognizing that there's no one behind the process to whom it's happening, that what we call self is the process of change itself.

I'll conclude with one other teaching of the Buddha: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Whoever hears this has heard all the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings."

Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings.

This is what we're really doing here together. We're practicing for this level of understanding.

I'll close with one last poem. This is from Teijitsu, who was the abbess of a Zen nunnery in the eighteenth century. From her writings:

*She saw that all phenomena arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that the knowing of this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this, no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.*

CHAPTER 5

# Working with Afflictive Emotions

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min


*In this comprehensive dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein examines the Buddha's teaching that the mind is inherently luminous but becomes clouded by visiting defilements (kilesa). Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya's teaching on the radiant mind, he explores how afflictive emotions—anger, fear, jealousy, resentment, greed, and others—obscure our natural clarity and cause suffering for ourselves and others.*

*Goldstein outlines a systematic approach to working with these challenging mind states. First comes clear recognition: learning to identify emotions through bodily sensations, feelings of unease, or obsessive thinking. He shares personal examples, including discovering embarrassment underlying his discomfort about living in a nice house, illustrating how unrecognized emotions drive mental agitation. He emphasizes that emotions often come in clusters and can be misperceived—we might mistake attachment for love, or frustration for anger—making accurate recognition essential.*

*The teaching then moves to mindful acceptance, which means fully acknowledging what is present without justifying, wallowing in, or judging these states. Goldstein offers the feeling of struggle as feedback indicating non-acceptance. From this foundation, we apply discernment (recognizing that all unwholesome states are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion) without self-judgment. The most liberating step is learning not to identify with emotions—shifting from "I am angry" to "there is anger"—which transforms afflictive emotions into freedom. This practice connects to the broader ethical dimension: these same forces of greed and hatred cause suffering throughout the world, making our inner work a contribution to collective well-being.*


One of the most important teachings of the Buddha is his teaching on the nature of mind. In a famous passage, he said, "This mind, bhikkhus—" and remember, bhikkhus in its broadest sense means anyone who is walking on the path, so he's really talking to us— "this mind, bhikkhus, is luminous, but it is clouded by visiting defilements."

What does this mean in our experience? We hear a sound—it's very simple, there's just the knowing of the sound. Or we feel a breath, or feel the sensations of a movement. In the simplicity of just knowing, there's no problem. It's in that respect that the mind is luminous. Luminous here means the knowing capacity, the capacity of the mind to know. The nature of this mind, the nature of knowing, the nature of consciousness in and of itself is open, clear, unobstructed. It simply knows.

An image that expresses this really well came to me while browsing in a bookstore. I saw a title: *The Nothing That Is*. I thought, this is for me. The book was actually a history of the number zero, by Robert Kaplan. The first line read: "When you look at zero, you see nothing. When you look through it, you see the world." I thought that was such an apt description of the mind. When you look at the mind, you see nothing—there's nothing to find. Look through it, and you see the world. I got through those first two lines of the book, and then it got too mathematical. But those two lines were worth the purchase price.

So the question arises, both on retreat and in the busyness of our lives: what obscures this natural clarity? If the nature of awareness, the nature of consciousness, is clear and unobstructed and open and luminous, why don't we live our lives from that place of simplicity?

When we look carefully at our experience, we see that what obscures this clarity of mind and what causes suffering in our lives—both for ourselves and for others—are the arising of the visiting defilements. In Pali, the word for defilements is *kilesa*. You could say the unwholesome states of mind. One term we use for these states is afflictive emotions—those emotions that are the cause of suffering. There's a long list of them, as we all know: anger, fear, anxiety, jealousy, resentment, greed, envy, ill will, unworthiness, frustration, depression, grief.

It's natural for most of us that these feelings will arise at different times. Our challenge is learning how to be with them in a skillful way—in a way that transforms them from being afflictive into freedom.

The Buddha went on to say, after noting that the mind is clouded by visiting defilements—which means they're not always there, but they do arise—"The mind, because it is luminous, is freed from visiting defilements." He's pointing out that we actually can free our minds from the suffering these emotions cause.

So how is it freed? How can we free the mind?

The first and fundamental step in working with these afflictive emotions is something we've already talked about: acknowledging and recognizing them when they arise. There's a wide range in our abilities to recognize and know what we're feeling. For some people it's very easy—they're tuned in to these different emotions, and when they arise, they recognize them clearly and quickly. For others it's difficult. We might be going on our merry way in our lives, being driven by different emotions that we may not even know are there.

Perhaps we feel something, but we're not tuning in, we don't know what these feelings are, yet still they're causing us to act in our lives, in our relationships, in our work. We're not tuned in, we're not aware, and so they can be the cause of a lot of difficulty.

For others, we may know what we're feeling—the recognition may be there, we're tuned in—but we may very well be in the habit of being lost in them, of being carried away by them, of being overwhelmed by them, this flood tide of emotions.

There are many different ways we can train ourselves to be mindful and to connect more mindfully when emotions arise, specifically with the afflictive ones. These are the emotions that I want to emphasize this evening, although everything I say applies equally to all emotions.

One way of tuning in is by becoming more aware of our bodily sensations. Maybe there are sensations of tightness or contraction or agitation or tension. Sometimes these sensations are residue of past emotions or past reactivity, so it doesn't always mean they reflect a current emotion. But if the sensations are enduring, maybe even strengthening—if we're feeling more and more tense and tight and contracted—that could be a signal for us to take a look. Is there some emotion underneath that is causing this reaction in the body? Maybe there's some anger or frustration. These physical sensations can be a signal for us to investigate and see what's there.

As an example, in my younger days, driving on narrow New England roads, I would find myself getting tenser and tighter whenever I found myself behind a really slow driver. Because they're curvy roads, it's difficult to pass. I could feel it in my body, which was definitely a signal of something going on in my mind—impatience and frustration. Of course, as I've gotten older, I have become one of those slower drivers. And I actually have compassion for the people behind me.

So that's one way: we tune into our body.

Another way we can tune into the afflictive emotions we're feeling is to begin noticing, in any activity, when we're feeling slightly out of sorts—just some malaise. We don't really know what it is, but we're not in the easy flow of our lives. Something is going on. Or maybe there are a lot of obsessive thoughts that keep coming again and again. These are signs, these are signals. They actually can serve as a mindfulness bell. That feeling of unease or the obsessive thinking is like a bell that wakes us up to look and say, "Okay, what's underneath that? What's driving that feeling?" Usually when we look, we see that there is some kind of afflictive emotion going on. It might be unacknowledged worry, or unacknowledged fear, or anxiety.

Here's another example of how feeling ill at ease can become a signal to look. When we opened IMS, this was in 1976—we just had our 40th anniversary—for the first thirteen years, I lived in the center. I had a room in the center, and sometimes I had to switch rooms because people needed it. When I was forty, I realized I needed to get out of there. It was enough, this living right in the center in a room.

Through the amazing generosity of one particular student and friend, she actually offered to build a house for myself and my colleague Sharon Salzberg. It was an unbelievable gift. The obsessive mind in the designing and building of the house is its own story, but that's not the point here.

So it gets built, and I move in. When I first moved in, I did a month-long self-retreat. I thought that would be a good way to enter into living in my new home. Well, my mind started going a bit crazy. "The house is too nice. Dharma teachers shouldn't be living in such a nice house. Maybe I'll move out and give it to the staff." My mind was obsessing about this and feeling very uneasy. It was generating all these thoughts.

Finally, I said, "Joseph, what is going on? What are you feeling?" I realized I was feeling embarrassed. I was feeling embarrassed about living in this really nice place. As soon as I saw that, as soon as I recognized it clearly, I realized I would much rather feel embarrassment than move out of the house. The whole thing became a non-issue.

But before I recognized the emotion, before I could accept it, it was driving all this unease. That's the power of bringing clarity to what we're feeling. We actually are able to be accepting of it because we're seeing it. This is really important.

That's one somewhat trivial example, although at the time it didn't feel trivial. But in our lives, this is what's happening constantly.

We can also pay attention to another kind of signal—when we're in the middle of some action, doing something, and there's just some part of us that feels a little uneasy about it. We feel maybe this is not quite wholesome, not quite the right act. When things feel a little off.

When we're doing something, we all, at different times, will be doing greater or lesser unskillful things—unless you happen to be fully enlightened. So this is going to happen. But we can start paying attention to it, just to that feeling of being slightly off. That can become a signal to look: okay, what emotion is driving this action? Is it greed? Is it ill will?

A very good place to work with this—and this would be after the retreat, at home—is in our speech. How often are we talking in a way that is just not quite right? Maybe it's gossiping about somebody, maybe it's something else, but we know it isn't quite right, whatever delight we get out of doing it. If we're paying attention to that sense of "no, this isn't quite right," then we can actually investigate: why am I doing this? What's the motivation? We can come to a much deeper understanding of ourselves and our actions in the world. That becomes another signal.

Sometimes we don't recognize different emotions because we're not seeing the full range of what's going on. We may be seeing and recognizing what's on the surface, but not seeing what's underneath. Because very often emotions come in clusters. It may not be just a single feeling.

Years ago, and for a few years, I was teaching retreats for lawyers, law students, and law professors. One of the third-year law students on one of the retreats said something really interesting. Of course, they're involved in a very litigious profession—a lot of conflict and a lot of stress. In our discussion of the meditation and his experience, he said, "I need to get angry in those situations so I don't feel the fear."

I thought that was so interesting. In those situations, he would manifest and feel anger all as a way of avoiding feeling the fear, which he felt would make him more vulnerable or less effective. When actually, learning to be accepting of the fear and to say, "Yeah, we can act"—there can be fear there and we can act in the face of fear, in the experience of fear. It need not stop us if we're accepting of it. But if we don't recognize it and we don't come to that place of acceptance, then it drives us to other unwholesome states, to other afflictive emotions.

This is an amazingly rich arena of investigation because it's such a big part of our lives. We may be aware of feelings of anger. But if we don't look deeper, we don't see: is there something underneath that? Maybe there are feelings of hurt or frustration or self-righteousness or resentment. There can be many emotions actually fueling the anger. And if we don't see them, then we stay caught in the anger. We have to look a little deeper.

What's important to understand is that this investigation in this realm is not discursive. It's not thinking about it, and it's not digging into our psychological history and life story. That's not what I'm talking about when I'm suggesting that we investigate.

Rather, it's understanding that there's a wide range of afflictive emotions as well as wholesome ones. Sometimes they're obscured, sometimes we're not aware of what's going on, and we can use various suggestions as a way of looking and investigating. But

it's not by thinking about it—it's by settling back and just opening up in a very intuitive way. We're just kind of dropping into ourselves. We could say we're dropping into our heart to see what's there.

If we learn how to do that, very often what's there simply reveals itself, just as it did with the embarrassment about the house. I didn't think it out. I just asked, "What's going on here?" and then it revealed itself. That's the kind of investigation I'm talking about. It's intuitive. It's just getting quiet enough for what is present to show itself.

Sometimes we don't recognize the emotions that are present because we misperceive them—we're taking one emotion to be another. Let me give you a few examples. At one time, I was feeling what I thought, what I was taking to be, sadness.

And so I was noting and being with it: sadness, sadness, sadness. But it was really staying a long time—that feeling of kind of being caught in some way. That feeling of being caught piqued my interest. How am I getting so hooked in this?

So I looked more carefully, and I saw that it wasn't sadness. It was unhappiness. Now these are close, but they are different emotions. These are different feelings. As soon as I saw accurately what it was, that allowed for the alignment with it so that I could be accepting. When I was misaligned, acceptance was impossible because I wasn't actually there for what was actually present.

Is this clear? When we're caught in something and we try all these different ways of looking and seeing and understanding and we're still caught, we might just check to see: Am I perceiving this accurately? It's very easy to misperceive. We could mistake frustration for anger. These are two different feelings.

Here's a big one. This is a life practice for you. We can mistake attachment for love. Try that one on. This is another whole talk. They are two very different feelings, and they are often conflated. That conflation can be the cause of a lot of suffering.

So clear recognition of what emotion is present—and again, particularly the afflictive ones, because they are the ones that are causing our suffering.

The next essential piece after recognition is mindful acceptance of the emotion. Because if we're not accepting of it, if there's aversion to it, we're actually feeding it. These emotions are afflictive, and if we're not aware and not accepting, they are going to be the cause of a lot of suffering.

So we have to understand what acceptance means in this context. What does acceptance mean in terms of an emotion that's afflictive? It doesn't mean justifying them. It doesn't mean wallowing in them. It doesn't mean judging them. Rather, it's simply the full acknowledgement: yes, anger is here, fear is present, frustration is present, jealousy is present. We're there for it, we recognize it, we're accepting of the fact that this is our current experience. In this regard, acceptance is just another word for mindfulness.

How do we know whether we're accepting of something or not? There's very good feedback, and I talked about this in my groups this morning. This has proved very freeing for me. One of the best indicators that we're not accepting of something is the feeling of struggle. If you're sitting, if you're walking, if you're in your life and you just feel that you're struggling with something, that struggle means only one thing: something is going on that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. It doesn't mean that we don't act. But it means we have to come to the acceptance of the fact that it's there.

Things that come up a lot in meditation: you're sitting and you just feel you're struggling. Instead of getting caught up and identified with being the struggler, let that be a signal to take a look. Okay, what's going on that I'm not open to? It might be some unpleasant sensations in the body that are in the background. We don't want to feel them, but they're there. So there's an internal struggle. It may be some afflictive emotion that's going on that we're not open to. It may be that the mind is just thinking the whole hour. And if we're not open and accepting of the fact that that's what's happening, we get into a struggle.

You can use this sense, which is very visceral, the sense of struggle.

It's actually a gift to us. This sense of struggle is telling us to look more closely at what's happening in mind and body, in our experience, to discover what it is we are not open to. What are we not accepting?

At one point I was practicing in Burma, and it was incredibly noisy. The monastery was right in the city, and they were doing a lot of construction. Right outside my room they were straightening steel rebars, banging metal on metal all day long, every day. I came to Burma to get enlightened, and they're banging away making this very unpleasant sound. So I was caught up in my own reactivity.

After a while—and it took a while—I asked myself, what's going on? How am I getting so caught in the reactivity? I looked at what was happening in my mind and saw it clearly: oh, complaining mind. That's what my mind was doing. It was just complaining

incessantly. As soon as I saw it and could name it, it ceased to be a problem. Because when I was noting "complaining mind, complaining, complaining," in that very noting the mind wasn't complaining. I was actually being mindful.

This is just another example of how we need to recognize and be accepting of what is actually present, not fighting with it.

Sometimes we don't recognize and accept afflictive emotions because they're too painful or uncomfortable. Just as with physical pain, we have to train ourselves to realize it's okay to feel these emotions. This happens naturally through practice. In the beginning we might feel a little bit of pain and get really upset by it, but over time we relax. Okay, it's unpleasant, it's painful, and it's okay. It's the same with painful emotions. It's okay to feel them, but the tendency may be to avoid: this is too uncomfortable.

Or perhaps the emotions that are arising don't fit our image of being a good meditator. Good meditators don't feel angry, don't feel greed, don't feel pride, don't lie. Therefore, greed and pride and dishonesty can't possibly be arising. We simply deny that this is actually what is going on because it doesn't fit our self-image.

We really need to wake up from that one, because this denial is the cause of so much self-delusion. We end up living in pretense instead of acknowledging the actuality of what is happening. As long as we're unwilling to feel certain emotions, we're really living defensively. We're living in fear, creating all these inner structures to avoid feeling them. Our practice is to realize it's much simpler and much freer to be willing to feel the unpleasant mind states. It's okay. It's okay that it's unpleasant.

Sometimes, though, we do need to take it slowly, because some painful emotions can be very powerful, even overwhelming. Sometimes people are dealing with trauma from the past or present, and the emotions are so intense and overpowering that the mind at a particular time may not have the capacity to hold them in balance. We need to recognize this as well. When powerful emotions arise for whatever reason and we feel we're getting out of balance, getting overwhelmed, then the skill in practice is to learn how to back off a little bit. We give the mind some space, some rest, and move away from it. It's not always a matter of plowing through.

This is really important, because it can actually be harmful at those times to think, "I'm a meditator, I have to be with it." That's not the wise thing. So there's a lot of nuance here. This is the art of meditation. The methodology, you could say, is very scientific—a very precise methodology. But it's also an art in terms of how we relate to all of our experience, particularly to powerful emotional states. We need the mind and the heart of an artist.

From this foundation of recognition and acceptance, we can then bring some wisdom to this whole world, to this whole arena of our emotions. We can begin to apply what has aptly been called emotional intelligence.

One aspect of this wisdom mind with respect to emotions is discerning the skillful from the unskillful, the wholesome from the unwholesome. In both cases, whether skillful or unskillful, we need to have recognized the emotion and we need to have come to the place of acceptance of the fact that it's there. But once we've landed in that place of openness to what's arising, then we can bring discernment. Is this a skillful emotion or mind state, one that's onward leading to happiness? Is this an unskillful, unwholesome state that's onward leading to suffering for ourselves or others?

The Buddha gave enormous emphasis to refining this discernment. It's really what brings an ethical dimension to psychology, to an understanding of the mind. It brings an ethical dimension to our meditation and to our lives. What is harmful to ourselves or others? What is not harmful? What is beneficial? We really need to be able to see this clearly.

But this discernment can be a very delicate undertaking, because for many people it's a very easy step from seeing that a particular mind state—like pride or envy or jealousy or greed or anger—is unskillful to saying, "I'm a bad person because it's arising." People very often do this. They personalize the emotion, and so it characterizes in their minds who they are, defining them. They feel they're a bad person for having these feelings, or they may feel that it's wrong that these feelings are arising.

That's not what this discernment is about. It's not wrong that they're arising. They're arising because of conditions, and they're arising in all of us. We need to recognize them. We need to be accepting of the fact that they're there. And then we can ask: Is this wholesome? Is it unwholesome? If it's unwholesome, if it's afflictive, it doesn't make us a bad person for having it. And it's not that it shouldn't be there—it is there. But with that wisdom, we can then make some choices in our lives. Is this a mind state that I want to cultivate? Is this a mind state or emotion that I want to let go of, that I want to abandon?

Without that discernment, we deny ourselves the possibility of choice. We're just going on in our lives, living out whatever particular conditioning we have. So we discern what's skillful and unskillful not in order to judge ourselves—even though you may notice that pattern arising. That's not the point of this discernment. The point is to make wise choices in our lives and in our practice.

But as with clear recognition and acceptance, there are nuances to this that can make it difficult to really see clearly what's skillful and what's unskillful, what's wholesome and what's unwholesome. Because some of the unskillful mind states are very seductive, and we justify them to ourselves.

There's a line from one of the suttas, a teaching of the Buddha, that is so apt, as are all the rest of his teachings. He said, "Anger, with its poisoned root and honeyed tip." There's part of us which loves it. It's energizing. We feel powerful. We can feel self-righteous—that honeyed tip of anger—but not seeing, as the Buddha said, its poisoned source. It's really rooted in a kind of hatred, but that can be masked.

Just another example of this: I read in an article about the writer Anne Lamott. She described how difficult it is to deal with the triumphs of other writers, particularly if one of them happens to be a friend. She writes, "It can cause just the tiniest bit of havoc with your self-esteem, and you find that you were hoping for small bad things to happen to this friend—for, say, her head to blow up."

These thoughts are going to come, you know. But we can see them, and even see them with a lightness of heart.

It's so important to begin to discern what's skillful and what's unskillful. The Buddha made it easy for us because he pointed out that all unwholesome states are rooted one way or another in greed, hatred, and delusion. And all wholesome states, one way or another, are rooted in non-greed, generosity, love, and wisdom. So there's a roadmap for understanding what it is that's going on.

This is particularly important because these different mind states, both wholesome and unwholesome, are not simply arising in our own hearts and minds—they are what motivates our actions. Why is there so much avoidable suffering in the world? We're bombarded with how much there is: the violence, the war, the hunger. There's enough food on the planet, but it's not being distributed very well. The oppression of racism, of homophobia. There are so many situations of intense suffering that's avoidable. So what's going on? Why is it still happening?

It's because people are acting out the mind states of these afflictive emotions. Acting out fear, acting out anger, acting out hatred, acting out greed. These forces are exactly the forces that cause so much suffering in the world.

And it's not only other people who have these mind states. One of the beauties of a retreat was expressed very well by a character in the book *Zorba the Greek*—do you remember that, from the sixties, by Nikos Kazantzakis? One of the characters has this line: "Self-knowledge is always bad news." There's a lot of truth to that. We're all here in

our practice, and if you've come expecting light and bliss and rapture, floating away into the clouds, you've probably been disabused of that by now. But even if that were possible, it's not the point. We really want to see with wisdom what it is that's going on in our minds, what it is that's going on in our hearts, so we can make this discernment.

We're taking responsibility for these forces which cause suffering in the world. We're taking responsibility for our part in that. But we can only do it if we're paying attention carefully, if we see and learn to recognize the afflictive emotions when they're there. To become accepting of them—accepting of the fact that they're there. Discerning what's wholesome from what's unwholesome. This is not only for our own happiness, but it's really for the benefit and happiness of the world.

So we've talked about recognition and acceptance. We've talked about discernment of skillful and unskillful. The last step in working with afflictive emotions—and with all others—is both the most difficult and the most liberating. And that is learning how to be with and to feel all of these different emotions, and then to learn how not to be identified with them. Not to be taking them as I or mine.

It is this understanding—seeing the selfless, empty nature of the emotion, whatever it may be—it's that understanding which transforms otherwise afflictive emotions into freedom.

So what does identification with an emotion mean? How do we experience that? I'm sure you're familiar with it, because it means being lost in, being caught up in, being captured by, carried away, taking them to be self. "This is me. This is who I am."

There is a huge difference—and I would suggest you play with this—the next time some strong mind state comes, there's a huge difference between experiencing it as "I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm frustrated, I'm angry, I'm greedy," versus "there is happiness, there is sadness, there is anger, there is pride." Just changing the way we language it will change our relationship to it.

But the habit of identifying and taking it to be self—"I'm angry, I'm this, I'm that"—that habit is very strong. So in the meditation practice, we need to retrain the mind in terms of how we're relating to these emotions. As our practice deepens, we can see with greater and greater clarity that the "I" and "mine" is extra. We are adding that to the experience.

It would be interesting for you to notice, when you feel caught up in some state, when you're really caught in and identified with it—if you can remember, notice the feeling of contraction. There's a certain tightness that happens when we're identified with these emotions. And then notice the difference, if you're mindful enough in those moments, to go from "I'm so angry" to "Oh, there's anger."

Or anger is like this. Notice the difference in your body. We go from a place of being contracted and tight, uptight, to a place of relaxation, to a place of ease. The emotion is the same, but we're relating to it in a completely different way. This is the wisdom mind that transforms the afflictive emotions into a place of freedom.

One of the ways of not identifying, of learning not to identify so much with these powerful states when they arise, is to see their conditioned nature. They're arising out of certain conditions, and when the conditions change, the emotions change. So it's actually possible to be with them. It's like watching cloud formations in the sky. There can be powerful rain clouds, ominous looking. But if we're just sitting back watching them form, and conditions change, and then they dissolve in the clear sky of the mind, there's no tension in the experience of them.

One way of seeing or experiencing the conditioned nature of emotion—and this is really fun to do, fun in a certain kind of way—is to see the relationship between thought and emotion. I have found this completely fascinating. I have noticed so many different times how a particular thought arises, maybe a thought about some difficult situation that I have to face, or a seductive thought. I have seen how a thought can arise in the mind and immediately trigger a strong emotion. Thought arises, fear. Thought arises, greed. Thought arises, ill will.

And even when we have experienced this very same thought and very same emotional response a hundred times, sometimes I'll just play and purposely have the thought, just to see the response. And it's so amazing, so impersonal. It really makes me marvel at the mind. Here's this thought which in itself is nothing—just an insubstantial nothing—and yet it can be so powerful in triggering this whole emotional response. To see that again and again and again, we begin to learn not to be so identified with the emotion. We say, "Yeah, this is just coming out of that particular condition." Of course it works the other way too—different emotions can trigger a lot of thoughts. Just seeing that cause and effect relationship.

We can also understand the conditioned nature of emotions by seeing that our level of wisdom, our level of understanding, will very much condition how we feel about things. What for one person could be really upsetting could leave another person completely at ease.

A famous example of this, and I tell this story often because it's so apt, is the story of the poet Ryokan, a Zen master from nineteenth-century Japan. He was a hermit who lived in the mountains, led a solitary life, very poor, just lived in a little hut. He was a great poet, and there's a lot of his poetry that one can read now. He'd just wander through the villages playing with the children and then go back to his hut to meditate and perhaps write some poetry.

Well, one day he came back to his mountain hut and found that the few possessions he had had been stolen. So, being Ryokan, he wrote a little poem: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

Now imagine you're going back after the retreat, you return to your apartment or your house, and everything's been stolen. "Oh, the moon at the window, the thief left it behind"—I don't think so. Depending on our level of understanding, of realization, we will respond very differently to the same circumstance. It just points to this truth: these emotions are conditioned by so many different things.

It's possible, when we're in the midst of strong emotions—and again, particularly the afflictive ones, the ones that cause suffering for ourselves or others—to begin to call up our inner Dharma coach. We have that wisdom mind within us, and sometimes it's just a matter of remembering and calling it up to remind us.

For example, there's one teaching the Dalai Lama speaks of a lot. So often with many of the teachings, whether from His Holiness or the Buddha, we hear things or read things and they just seem like a good description. We don't take them as an instruction. One of the Dalai Lama's favorite teachings—I think it comes from Shantideva—is this: when anger arises, when we're really in the throes of it, the inner Dharma coach, the wisdom mind, offers a reminder. One's enemies teach one's patience. And so we should really honor our enemies. They're teaching us patience.

But how often do we actually think of that? In the midst of some conflict, when we're caught up in anger, do we stop and reflect in that way? Not unless we practice doing it. But it actually has the potential to free us—to appreciate what can be learned in that situation, instead of being caught up and totally lost in the emotion.

So we use that inner Dharma coach. We might reflect: what I'm really angry about, when we're caught up—is it really that important given the magnitude of suffering in the world? We can get caught up in such a narrow little space and blow it all out of proportion to what's really going on. And so it's just a reminder for us: okay, I don't have to be quite so caught by this. It creates some inner space.

One teaching of the Buddha sets a very high bar, and I love it because it just points to a possibility, a kind of inner coaching. He said, "Bhikkhus, there are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you." So he's talking about people talking to us. "Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or with harm, spoken with a mind of loving kindness or with a mind of inner hate." People can speak to us in all of these different ways. "Herein, you should train yourself thus: our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving kindness."

Just imagine: there's this person who is speaking to you angrily, harshly, lying, filled with hate. Our mind will remain unaffected. Utter no unskillful words. Abide compassionate for their welfare, filled with a heart of loving kindness. That's a high bar. But even to hear those words and to know—well, can I remember this?—even if we can't do it in the moment, just knowing that this is a possibility. We don't have to be caught up in our own inner reactivity. There's a possibility here of actual transformation, of freedom for us in our lives.

All of these practices—the clear recognition, acceptance, discernment of what's skillful and unskillful, learning how to be with emotions without identifying with them, without taking them to be self, seeing their conditioned nature—all of these ways of working with powerful mind states open up the possibility of a much deeper and greater happiness in our lives. We can really begin to see how all of these mindsets, all of these emotions, can self-liberate in this space of open awareness, the open sky of the mind. We're just with them, we see them, we recognize, we're accepting the fact that they're there, we see them with wisdom, and we also see that they arise and pass away. We come to a place of much greater ease, much greater freedom.

I'd like to close with a couple of lines from the Persian poet Hafez: "Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets trying to find you."

It is trying to find us. We can be happy. We can be free. And so this is really what our practice is all about.

CHAPTER 6

# Reflections on Non-Self

Joseph Goldstein · 58 min

> *In this deeply personal dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein moves away from traditional lecture format to share transformative insights from his own retreat experiences over recent years—moments of sudden awakening that illuminate the Buddhist teaching of anattā (non-self). Drawing from the Theravāda tradition, Tibetan masters like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Kalu Rinpoche, and the Korean Zen master Chinul's framework of 'sudden awakening, gradual cultivation,' Goldstein offers accessible doorways into understanding selflessness.*
>
> *The talk introduces several practical contemplations: recognizing that 7.28 billion people are unaware of our existence, shifting from 'I am' to 'there is' as a framework for experience, and employing the Buddha's vivid metaphors for the five aggregates (khandhas)—body as foam, feeling as bubbles, perception as mirage, formations as a coreless plantain tree, and consciousness as a magic show. Goldstein shares how the phrase 'endlessly forgiving' and 'love no matter what' dissolved his own contracted sense of self during interpersonal conflict, revealing that love and emptiness are ultimately the same.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is the instruction on mindful seeing as an antidote to the judging mind, and a step-by-step verification of the Buddha's teaching that seeing impermanence leads to non-clinging, non-agitation, and a taste of nibbāna. These teachings offer immediate, experiential access to freedom rather than distant goals, showing how liberation can arise in any moment through proper direction of attention.*

Of all the Buddhist teachings, those about non-self or not-self are probably the most elusive. We can easily understand, at least conceptually and to a large extent experientially, the truth of impermanence. And we've all tasted the truth of suffering in our lives, or the unsatisfying quality of impermanent conditions. But non-self runs counter to even our common sense. Our whole lives revolve around this idea of a self, an "I." And yet, this understanding of selflessness is essential—it's an essential part of every Buddhist tradition.

In the Theravada tradition from the Pali texts, when the Buddha is giving advice to his son Rahula, who had become a monk, one of the classic teachings he gave was this: "See everything in the light of perfect wisdom. This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself." That's with regard to every arising phenomena.

From the Tibetan teachings, one of the very greatest masters of the last century was Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He wrote: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others too."

There's one teaching from an 11th century Korean Zen master, Chinul, that I've really appreciated a lot over all these years and the way he framed our practice. He framed it in the context of sudden awakening, gradual cultivation. He's pointing to the possibility that we can each have moments of sudden awakening to really quite transforming truths and realizations. And that sudden awakening, that insight, that understanding then needs to be cultivated in our lives.

Tonight, rather than a usual well-structured Dharma talk, I'd like to share with you some of the experiences I've had during the last few years of my own retreats—those kinds of insights or understandings that had that flavor of a sudden awakening to something that I didn't understand before. They all revolve around, in some way, freeing ourselves from this notion of self, of "I." Sometimes they came just as intuitive reflections. Sometimes they came through the words of a book. Or sometimes passages from the suttas, from the discourses that I may have read countless times before, and then just reading them once more on retreat, the words kind of jump out and I understand them in a new way. So this evening's talk is going to be a collage of different experiences.

The first one is, in a way, perhaps the simplest to understand. It's kind of just a commonplace reflection, but it struck me deeply: how for each one of us, we are the stars of our own life stories. We have become the center of our own universe. And that's how we live our lives. But of course, for 7.28 billion people in the world, they don't even know I exist.

This came home even more personally when I was thinking about a friend, who I don't see that often, but we're close friends, who's going through quite a difficult time. I realized that as she's dealing with her own life story, I probably don't play any role at all in it. And so there was just that sense of disappearing in a certain way from thinking my own story was so important or so central. It kind of dissolved it in a way.

I think this perspective can loosen our attachment, our identification with our own particular dramas. It's not to say that we don't engage with them, and they're not relatively important for us. But they are not the center of the universe. And most of the universe is completely unaware of it. So it's just a little something to keep in mind.

To get to a little more profound Dharma: there was a famous Burmese monk, Ledi Sayadaw, who was both a great practitioner and also a very great scholar of Buddhism. I was reading some of his teachings and came across a passage where he outlined an example of wrong view in our lives—basic wrong view. And it was basically about everything we believe.

This was the list of what he considered wrong view: the feeling that I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm excited, I'm angry, I'm afraid, I'm interested, I'm planning, I'm deciding, I'm choosing. It was a whole long list. It's how we live our lives. It was all wrong view. Why? Because of the "I." I am this, I am that. And so it really just struck me that we need to take a look at that.

This is a teaching that gets to the very heart of how we're living—whether we're living with a right or wise understanding, or living in the realm of wrong view.

So I came up with a framework, a short little teaching. I called it "From Am to Is." Instead of "I'm angry, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm eating, I'm walking, I'm planning, I'm judging," we shift to: "There is anger, there is love, there is walking, there is eating, there is tasting." Just making that shift in the way we're both conceptualizing and experiencing the different activities of our lives.

It would be very interesting for you, as you're going through the day, to keep an eye out for the many times there's that feeling of "I am," of "I'm doing something." I'm walking, or I'm eating, or I'm thinking. Just watch for when that sense of "I am" is strong—and it happens frequently throughout the day. Get a sense of what that feels like, this sense of "I am." I think you'll see that there's a certain contraction of our being. It's like we collapse everything into this sense of "I am whatever"—I'm doing this, I'm thinking this, I'm feeling this.

Then in that moment, simply reframe it as "there is." There is eating, there is walking, there is happiness, there is sadness. And just in that moment of shifting the framework, notice what that feels like. I think you'll experience, as you go from "am" to "is," a certain release, a certain spaciousness, a certain openness. Instead of being contracted in the "I am," there's just the openness of awareness of what is.

If you remember from the first morning's instructions, I suggested using the phrase "there is a body" as a way of settling into the sitting. It's very interesting to do that in the walking as well. When you're walking, you might go from that sense of "I'm walking," but even if you don't have that strong sense, just bring to mind the phrase "there is a

body" as you're walking. Something quite remarkable happens. You're walking at any speed—this can be at a more normal speed or a slower speed—and you establish "there is a body." We're creating a framework for our awareness of the whole body.

What's so interesting is that as we do that, the sense of the body disappears. There's actually no body. What we begin to experience is just sensations in space. From opening that framework and getting away from the "I am" sense, the body disappears, and we begin to get a sense of the selflessness of it all. What's being known in that moment is simply different sensations arising and passing in space, in openness, in emptiness. It gives us a taste, a real connection to what selflessness—the experience of selflessness—actually is.

If you think this is not so important, I want to read just a couple of lines from the Buddha. He said, "By rightly understanding 'I am,' one makes an end of suffering." That's a pretty clear statement. By rightly understanding the sense "I am," one makes an end of suffering. He also said, "The eradication of 'I am' is the attainment of nibbāna here and now."

So this is worth experimenting with. It can give us a real taste of freedom in that sudden awakening. And of course there needs to be a gradual cultivation of that experience and that realization. But it can point to something very profound.

I like this framework of sudden awakening, gradual cultivation, because so often we practice with the idea, "Oh well, I'll practice for the next thirty years and maybe I'll realize something." But actually, sudden awakening to these moments of transforming understanding can happen in any moment. It can happen now, if we know how to direct the mind, to direct the attention. So I'd really encourage you to experiment and explore this particular framework—from "am" to "is"—noticing when the "I am" is strong during the day, and in those very moments recognizing: there is whatever is happening. Begin to see that, feel that, and experience it for yourselves.

We create a strong sense of separation, a sense of self, very predominantly through the attachment we have to our views and opinions about things. With some degree of awareness, you might have noticed that we have a lot of opinions about things we know nothing about.

That does not stop us from having opinions about it.

Just one example of this, which was very striking to me and was very freeing: this goes back years, many years, when I was first teaching at Naropa in 1975. One of the great Tibetan masters, Dudjom Rinpoche, had come to visit. He was really one of the great masters. And there was a poster advertising a talk he was giving. The poster said, "Dudjom Rinpoche," time and place of the talk, and then "incarnation of Sariputra."

Now Sariputra was the chief disciple of the Buddha. And in the Theravada tradition, when you're fully enlightened, you don't come back. I had spent the last, I don't know how many years, immersed in this tradition and understanding. So when I saw this, my mind went on tilt, because here's this great master—this was not just some ordinary person, this was a great enlightened master—incarnation of Sariputra. That's impossible.

And out of that moment of tilt, I realized that I really had no idea. All I knew was that the Theravada tradition said this, and the Tibetan tradition said that, but it was completely outside my realm of experience to assess which was true, which was right, which was wrong. And it was such a freeing moment to realize that I did not have to have an opinion about that which I didn't know. I recommend it.

So we just stay open. We're not drawing conclusions. Well, maybe this is true, maybe that is true, maybe they're both true in some mysterious way.

Many people have asked about the relationship of metta and vipassana. One way of understanding the relationship is that metta is really operating on the relative level of being, of self, of oneself to another. And vipassana is really trying to understand the more ultimate level of selflessness and emptiness. That is one way of understanding the relationship.

But there's also another way. There's a way that metta and the feeling of metta actually has a liberating function, can take us out of the sense of self. I want to share with you something that was profoundly transforming for me.

In situations of conflict, when there's some big conflict going on with another person, that conflict is often fed and sustained by our attachment to being right, or to feeling right. And that can fuel our emotions for a long time.

Some time ago, I had been involved in a situation like that. Very problematic situation, a lot of strong feelings on both sides. I was on retreat, and this had been going on for quite a while. There was a lot of suffering involved, a lot of feeling of separation and judgment. And of course, as I'm sure you can relate to, my mind was just going over this

again and again and again. I became the best lawyer in the world for my case, you know, over and over again, all the arguments for why I was right—because of course I was right.

This went on—this was the retreat, but when something very powerful is happening in our lives, the mind can really churn it out.

Then I happened to come across and read quite a remarkable book called *Tattoos on the Heart*. Maybe some of you have heard of it. It's written by a man named Gregory Boyle, who is a Jesuit priest living in LA, working and living right in the midst of all the gangs down there, working with the kids and teenagers and young adults who are killing each other. This is a violent situation. And the conditions in which the kids grow up, which he outlines in the book—you can see where that violence comes from, because the conditions of their lives have been so terrible.

And the stance that he holds in the midst of all this violence, with regard to all the kids involved, is love no matter what. No matter what they've done—and sometimes it's horrendous, they're killing each other and killing innocent bystanders in the process—love no matter what.

The way he writes, he writes very beautifully and very simply. The book transmits that feeling. You really get a sense of what that could mean. And there's a lot of heartwarming humor in the book as well. He talks about how many of the kids actually are transformed by his "love no matter what." It's such an absolute stance that he has managed to embody.

Very inspiring. One of the lines in the book, when people were describing his work and talking about the kids, was: "You can't disappoint us enough, no matter what you do. You're not going to disappoint us, because it's love no matter what."

So I was reading this book in the midst of my own lawyering, and I started using a little mantra which was a precursor to "love no matter what." That little mantra that I started using as I was thinking about all this conflict and about how right I was and how wrong the other person was—just that whole thing.

I just started repeating to myself, inspired by this book and by his work and his being: endlessly forgiving. Endlessly forgiving. It doesn't matter what happened. It doesn't matter the situation. Endlessly forgiving.

And it was so interesting. Whenever my mind would start churning again about the situation—all the reasons, all the justification, the being right—it doesn't matter. Endlessly forgiving. And that morphed into "love, no matter what." It doesn't matter. And it's the "no matter what" part that really is the liberating function, because there's no back door. It doesn't matter.

What I experienced was like coming out of the prison of self and self-justification into the space of love no matter what. It was just the dissolving of that contraction of self and "I" fueled by "I'm right." So it was really profoundly transforming to see the possibility of that space—that we don't have to stay imprisoned in self-justification in whatever situation we're in. It's love no matter what. That's a vastly superior way of being than being right with attachment to that and the contraction of that.

This was an example, and for me it was like a new level of understanding—a new level of seeing how that feeling of love no matter what, which is really mettā, dissolves the boundaries of self. So it's not just on the relative level of this being to that being. It opens up to a space where we realize that love and emptiness of self are the same thing. Love and emptiness are really the same.

So that's where our practice is leading, whether we're doing vipassanā or we're doing mettā. And I think it's helpful to explore that realm, explore that possibility. Seven point two billion people don't know I exist. From "am" to "is." Love no matter what. All of these are ways of opening up to this understanding of selflessness.

The next reflection that had a very interesting effect on my practice had to do with a new application of the understanding, the teaching about the five aggregates. Those of you who are familiar with the Buddha's teachings will know this. Those of you who are new to the teachings may not be familiar with this terminology.

The five aggregates are the Buddha's way of analyzing the entirety of our experience, the entirety of this mind-body process, of everything we experience. The Buddha analyzed it in terms of five different aggregates or elements of experience. First is the physical sensations—the physical world, the material world, the body. The second aggregate is feeling tone, which we've discussed: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how we taste experience. The third aggregate is perception, which is that faculty of recognition. We look at something and we see a tree, we recognize it as a tree, or a house, or a car, or a person. That quality of recognition, of naming—the whole world of concepts is perception. I'm going to talk a little more about that.

The fourth aggregate is mental formations—all of the mental activity beside feeling tone and perception, which were singled out because they're particularly important. So everything: anger, happiness, sadness, compassion, love, concentration, mindfulness, delusion—all of that is in this aggregate of mental formations. And the fifth aggregate is consciousness, the knowing faculty.

Now for years I read about this. It's on almost every page of the suttas, of the discourses. The Buddha talked about this a lot because when we understand that our whole experience is simply the dance of these aggregates, and we see the impermanent nature of each of those aggregates, that is the doorway to realizing that there's no self behind them. Everything we think of as self or as "I" is really just a play of the aggregates.

I had read this endless times, heard endless talks about it, usually quite bored in listening to them, because for a long time it just sounded very technical and philosophical and I didn't really get it. But over the years of practice and reading and beginning to apply—asking myself, "Can I look at this really as an instruction rather than as a description? Can I begin to look at my experience in this way?"—it began to take on a lot more meaning as a doorway to understanding the selfless nature of it all.

For those of you who are relatively new to the teachings and the practice and are not familiar with this, it would be worth doing a little study after the retreat, just to learn more about it, because it's a very essential framework for understanding.

So it could be a way of further exploring.

Okay, all of this is just the precursor to what happened on the retreat. There's one description the Buddha gave of the aggregates, quite a famous passage. He said the body, or the material elements, is like a lump of foam. Feeling tones are like bubbles in a stream. Perceptions are like a mirage. Mental formations are like a plantain tree, like a banana tree. Those trees have no core—there's no pith. You can peel it all away and there's nothing at the center. So all formations in the mind are like a plantain tree. And consciousness is like a magic show.

This is a passage I've read many times. The body is like a lump of foam, feelings like bubbles on a stream. But on this one retreat, again—this is something I recommend in reading the Buddhist teachings—it's so easy to read them as a description instead of as an instruction. When we read it as a description, we go, "Oh yeah, that's nice, it's a poetic description." But that doesn't really have much transformative value.

So in this particular retreat, I started taking it as an instruction—the body as a lump of foam. When I was sitting and feeling all the different sensations of the body, I let that image settle into the way I was experiencing. The body as a lump of foam. And it is like that. It's just different sensations. There's no solidity. When we really drop into the actuality of what we're experiencing, what we call the body is really just different sensations here and there, appearing and disappearing. The image helps us see that, if we actually employ it.

Something very remarkable happened just by using that image in this experiential way. Are you familiar in your practice with the experience of being with something *in order for* it to become something else? We're with the pain in order for it to decrease. We're with the breath in order to become more calm. We're leaning into the process, even if it's just leaning into the next moment. There's that tendency to be leaning into the unfolding aspect of the process, as if it's going to unfold finally into something or other that we think is desirable.

Well, when I used that image—the lump of foam, the body is a lump of foam—it cut that leaning into the next moment. Because I realized: the body is a lump of foam in this moment. It's going to be a lump of foam in the next moment. It will always be a lump of foam. And so there's nothing to become. Do you get a sense of it? It was like dropping back completely, just here in the lump of foamness.

This is significant because one of the aspects of the cause of suffering—when the Buddha talked about craving as being the cause of suffering—it's not only craving for sense pleasures. He talked about the craving for becoming. That wanting the next moment, or leaning into the unfolding process. So when we cut that craving—the body is a lump of foam, it will always be a lump of foam, there's nothing to want, nothing to do, nothing to have—we're just with that. That's a freeing moment. That's a moment of sudden awakening, a moment of non-craving.

So we can employ the image of feeling tones as bubbles on a stream. Using the lump of foam, the body as that, we see that the feeling tone of each of those sensations that make up this lump of foam—each one has a particular feeling tone to it. It's either pleasant or it's unpleasant. And we see they are like bubbles on a stream.

They're there for a moment and they're gone. They're there for a moment and they're gone. And the more attentive we are to the moment, we begin to see this, and so become much less reactive to these feeling tones. Instead of pleasant leading to "I want more," or unpleasant triggering "push it away," it's just bubbles on a stream, arising and passing in each moment.

Perception as a mirage. We're living in the world of our perceptions, and it's very easy to become aware of this, particularly in the domain of seeing. For some reason, in retreats we don't emphasize being mindful of seeing so much, but it actually is one of the most profound and freeing aspects, so I want to give a little emphasis to it now.

For many, if not most people—for people with intact, working eyes—seeing is probably the predominant sense field of our lives. We are living in and moving through the world of what's being seen. And in the seeing, perception plays a very predominant role. We are recognizing what we see, naming what we see, and then having reactions to what we see.

Something has come up in a few of the groups I've done which highlights the importance of understanding this. Some of you, probably just a few, may have had the experience of the judging mind. I had this, probably to the same extreme you have all had it: being on retreat, particularly at IMS, I would go into the dining room and my mind would have a judgment about almost every person there. I didn't like the way they walked, or the way they moved, or what they were wearing, or maybe I did like it—how much food they took, how quickly they were moving. All of it: judging, judging, judging. It was so ridiculous. And I was aware that it was ridiculous, and yet the mind kept doing it.

So I started to investigate: what's behind all this judging? Instead of going all psychological on it and digging back into my childhood, I realized that all of that judgment was born from seeing unmindfully. My mind was going out through the eye door, landing on all of these beings, and then having judgments about each one of them. So I started going into the dining room, and all I would do is note "seeing." Seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing—bringing mindfulness to that sense door contact. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the judgments stopped. Because what was feeding the judgment was not being mindful of seeing.

This is why bringing awareness or attention to perception is so important. And it's not only people in the dining room—this is our whole world. If we're not mindful that we're seeing, then our mind creates a whole world of perceptions that we're living in. And yet the perception is like a mirage. It's a mind-created world that we're living in.

This is something you could play with, and I would suggest you really spend some time as you move through the day or night, taking some time where you're making seeing the object of your meditation. Practice being mindful of seeing.

Then there's just a tiny little step further which you might also explore. I started changing the note from "seeing" to "perceiving." It's just an interesting shift. The shift is very hard to explain, but I would encourage you to do that and see for yourself. By noting "perceiving," somehow it strengthened the understanding that what was being perceived, or the way of perceiving, was very conditioned—it was mirage-like.

As a way of understanding this conceptually: we're seeing and perceiving, and we think there's really a reality out there that we're perceiving, and we know what it is. But some being with a differently constructed eye—an insect, for example, or a bird, or some animal with an eye constructed in a different way—will perceive a completely different reality. Which one is real? Then you multiply that by countless beings with countless sense door structures. Everything that's perceived through the sense doors will be different depending on how that sense door is constructed. Where is the reality? Perception is like a mirage.

It's very interesting. It frees us from living in the sphere where things are so solid, where we understand the reality of it all. Everything becomes much more open, spacious, and fluid. This doesn't mean that we abandon the conventional consensual reality that we live in, because that would make life very difficult. But we don't have to give it some ultimate truth level.

The body is a lump of foam. Feeling tones are like bubbles in a stream. Perception is like a mirage. And formations—if you did nothing else but see this one, you would leave here ninety-five percent happier.

Mental formations, which is everything going on in our minds—all our stories and all our emotions and all our thoughts and all our planning and all our judging—it's like a plantain tree. Each one of those states, each one of those experiences has no core. There's no pith to it, no substance to it. They're all arising out of momentary conditions. The conditions change, the experience changes. It's just like cloud formations. Conditions come together in a certain way and clouds appear. Conditions change and they disappear.

If we could see, if we could experience all of our inner mental world, our emotional world, as a plantain tree—and we can do this in a moment. This is not a far-off realization. That's why these metaphors, taken as instructions, are very powerful. This is not just a description; this is a way to look. It's a freeing way to look at our experience. And in a moment—it may just be for a moment, it may just be for a glimpse—but we see, "Oh yeah, this anger, or this excitement, or this whatever it is, there's no substance to it. There's no pith." It's tremendously freeing to understand our experience in that way. So again, moments of sudden awakening that could happen in any moment.

Consciousness as a magic show. I mean, this whole big thing. So just one example of how we can begin to get a taste of that, a little magical display.

I was on retreat one time at the Forest Refuge and having lunch. And for some reason my mind just got interested in exploring taste consciousness, because I was eating and enjoying the tastes of the food. Now, in the Buddhist teaching, taste consciousness arises out of four conditions. There's a tongue, there's saliva, there is some food or something on the tongue, and there's attention. If all those conditions are there, taste consciousness will arise.

So I knew that from my study. And I just started playing. It's like a thought experiment. This is just a little sidebar—sometimes thought experiments can be very powerful. I had just read a biography of Einstein. His discoveries were all thought experiments. He was not an experimental physicist; he was a theoretical physicist. So his great revelations came through the power of his immensely creative thought process. This is not something to underestimate.

So I started having a little thought experiment with taste. I'm sitting there eating and tasting, tasting, and then I just imagined: would taste consciousness arise if there was no tongue? And it became clear that it wouldn't. Or take any one of those conditions away—taste consciousness would not be there. What that revealed, just in that moment of a precise thought experiment, was the conditioned nature of consciousness. That consciousness is not some solid reality that we can call self; it's arising out of conditions. Take one condition away, and it's not there.

We can do this with each of our senses. We can do it with seeing. We need a working eye, something coming in front of it, light, attention. Seeing consciousness arises.

Take any one of the conditions away, and that consciousness doesn't arise.

And so we get these moments of actually seeing the impermanent, magical, display-like quality of consciousness itself. There's nothing solid there to call self, to call "I."

When we're not mindful of the aggregates—that all of our experience is just this dance, just this dance of the aggregates: physical sensations and feeling tone and perceptions and all the mental formations and consciousness—when we're not mindful of that, we get identified in each moment with the body, or with our feelings, or with our emotions. And in that moment of identification, the sense of self is strengthened. We get imprisoned by it.

There's a teaching by Kalu Rinpoche, another great Tibetan teacher. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things." So we're living in that world of the mirage of perception. "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all."

Do you see the potential for freedom in this? When we let go of the imprisonment of self, the imprisonment of being identified with momentary arisings, the contraction of that. When we go from "am" to "is." As we experience that—and again, it can be just for moments at a time—we see that we are nothing. There's no one there behind experience to whom it's happening. There is a reality, which is just the dance of all these elements. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing, and being nothing, we are everything. That is all.

The last possibility for sudden awakening that I'll talk about this evening is a shortcut to Nibbana. This was a teaching that appears in the suttas a lot. I read it countless times and never applied it. Then on one retreat, I read it again and thought, "Why don't I see for myself if this is true?" In applying it as an instruction, it became clear—there's something here.

It's a very short teaching. It says, "In seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When the mind doesn't cling, it is not agitated. When it is not agitated, it personally attains Nibbana."

I had taken it just as a description of things. But on this one retreat, I said, "Why don't you check it out? See if it's really meaningful and experienceable."

It's possible. At those times when you are directly experiencing the flow of changes—it could be just in the experience of changing sensations in a step, or the changing sensations of the breath, or more open awareness with things arising and passing—whenever you're in that space of really seeing the flow of phenomena, at that time, in seeing impermanence, check back in the mind to see whether there's clinging or not.

Very interesting. What I saw, and I think you will as well, is that actually in moments of seeing impermanence, the mind is not clinging. Because if it were clinging, it wouldn't be seeing the flow. So we can get a direct experience and taste of the mind of no clinging, because we're experiencing it in that moment.

Check it out. Really see for yourself. When the mind is seeing impermanence, it doesn't cling. So we see if that's true. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. Check that out too. When you're in this flow, when you're seeing, looking at the mind and seeing that it's not clinging, notice whether it's agitated or not. I think you'll find that when the mind is not clinging, it is not agitated.

So by looking directly, we begin to experience and taste the non-agitated mind. We're in that experience of non-agitation, and we're recognizing it, we're seeing it. And right in that space, we can get a sense, an intuitive sense. Yes, it's out of that stillness, out of that non-agitation that the possibility of freedom, of Nibbana, can arise. There is a visceral taste of it in the non-agitation.

So again, these are a few very simple short steps to enlightenment. Seeing impermanence—mind not clinging. Mind not clinging—non-agitated. Non-agitated—the doorway opens. Go for it.

So there's all of this. But how do we bring this realization, how do we integrate this understanding—or these sudden awakenings to selflessness, the emptiness of self—into the process in all these ways? Where our story is not the center of the universe anymore. Where we go from "am" to "is." Where we really experience that openness of love no matter what. When we see all the aggregates, which is the totality of our experience, really employing the metaphors the Buddha used for us to see the emptiness of it all, the insubstantiality of it all. To really practice this impermanence, non-clinging, non-agitation.

So how do we integrate all of this in the conventional reality of our lives? Because in conventional reality, there is a self and there is an "I"—that's how we operate, that's how we relate to one another.

I just want to read a teaching from a Tibetan master, Khenchen Gyalchen. He said, "We are not denying or ignoring the label of 'I.' We are just questioning whether it exists independently. The Buddha himself used conventional language when he said things like, 'When I was in such and such a place, I did such and such things. This is my dharma teaching.' So the label of 'I' can be used conventionally."

We live in that world, and we use this language conventionally. But the self to which it refers does not exist in the way we perceive it. That's why we are said to be confused. Hard as we try, we cannot stabilize or establish as true that which does not exist. No matter how long we meditate, we will never see a self. We cherish ourselves so much

that surely we would have seen it by now. Someone who will sacrifice anything to protect the self would have found it if it existed. But no one has seen a self exist in self. Grasping and cherishing that which does not exist is at the center of all suffering.

This is why it's so essential to this whole path of freedom. This is the essence of it.

So just to sum all this up, I'd like to quote a wonderful teaching from another Tibetan teacher. He said, "Is the self real? No—but it's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerated."

That's the realization we have to come to. Yes, we're real, and we live our lives from that place. But can we understand that we're not really real? That we exaggerated.

CHAPTER 7

# Deepening Insight into Impermanence

Joseph Goldstein · 1h02

> *In this profound retreat talk, Joseph Goldstein examines how the practice of mindfulness leads to liberation through deepening insight into impermanence (anicca). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explores the Buddha's bold claim that the four foundations of mindfulness constitute the direct path to awakening. Goldstein emphasizes that awareness alone is not enough—mindfulness must serve wisdom by revealing the truth of constant change.*
>
> *The talk moves from intellectual understanding to direct perception of impermanence across multiple scales: from the attosecond movements of electrons to the rise and fall of civilizations, from the subtle sensations within a single breath to the inevitability of aging and death. Goldstein offers practical instructions for observing how seeing impermanence naturally leads to non-clinging, non-agitation, and what Buddhadāsa called "temporary nibbāna." He references teachings from Suzuki Roshi, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Ledi Sayadaw, and the Dhammapada to illuminate how this ordinary truth becomes extraordinarily transformative when seen clearly.*
>
> *Goldstein guides practitioners to investigate their own experience: noticing the flow of change in walking, breathing, and daily activities; reflecting on mortality without quarrel; and recognizing that liberation depends on one's own efforts. The teaching culminates in a powerful invitation to use the retreat as an opportunity to see impermanence so deeply that the heart naturally releases its grip, finding ease and freedom in the midst of life's constant flux.*

The Buddha opens the Satipatthana discourse, which as I mentioned is the discourse he gave on the four foundations of mindfulness. It's the root teaching for Vipassana practice. He opens the discourse with an amazingly bold and unambiguous statement. I'd just like to read the opening lines of it. He says, "This—this practice—is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana"—the Pali word for the highest peace or awakening—"namely, the four foundations of mindfulness." That's pretty direct. This is the direct path to liberation.

The obvious question then for all of us as we engage in the practice is: how in fact does the practice of mindfulness—that is, feeling the body, feeling the breath, observing thoughts—how does being mindful of all this actually lead to liberation? How does it work?

I think this question has particular relevance now, these days, given the widespread teachings of mindfulness where liberation or awakening is not the stated goal. As mindfulness has spread and become so popular, it's generally not taught in the context of awakening. So for us on retreat, we really want to understand how it leads to the highest goal, the highest potential. We really want to understand how mindfulness leads to the uprooting of the very deeply conditioned tendencies in the mind—habitual patterns of greed and craving and hatred and fear and ignorance. This is the essence of the awakened mind: the mind that's free of what are called these afflictive emotions, free from the sleep of delusion and ignorance.

We need to understand how mindfulness is not an end in itself. It's a methodology. And the real question is: what do we learn from being mindful? We're practicing the tools, we're practicing the method, and then what is it that we're learning from doing this?

There's a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya with very helpful teachings. He's teaching in the West more and more now. The title of one of his little booklets is *Awareness Is Not Enough*. That's kind of a shocking statement, where all of the emphasis is on being aware, being mindful—and then he's saying awareness is not enough. We need to use the great power of mindfulness, which means being aware without grasping, being aware of what's arising without pushing things away, in order to investigate what is true. The awareness is in the service of wisdom. That's why we're cultivating it.

One of the simplest, most accessible, and profoundly transformative avenues of investigation—a path into the deepest kind of wisdom—is a growing and increasingly refined awareness of impermanence.

Many of you are probably familiar with the Zen master Suzuki Roshi. He founded the San Francisco Zen Center back in the late fifties or sixties and wrote a collection of his teachings, the classic book from those years, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. A student once said to him, "I've been listening to your lectures for years, but I still don't understand. Could you please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?" Suzuki Roshi replied, "Everything changes."

The implications of this statement are enormous. Although we all know that everything changes—this is not a big surprise, not a hidden or esoteric teaching—we need to go from an intellectual understanding of this, which I think we all have, to an ongoing, direct, immediate, intimate perception and awareness of change as it's happening. We could probably go up to anybody on the streets of Woodacre, if we find anybody there, and say, "Do things change?" Everybody would say, "Of course things change." We all know it on an intellectual level, but we need to go from that level of understanding to seeing it very closely, very directly, very carefully. That's where the transformation happens. It's not simply in knowing that everything changes.

When we can do this—and this is what our practice is about—we practice being mindful of what's arising in order to see this truth. Everything is changing all the time, so it's not something we need to create. We simply need to be present enough to see it and to see it clearly. As we refine our awareness of the experience of things changing moment to moment, over time our hearts and our minds relax. We let go of struggle. We let go of so many different kinds of suffering.

We can see this clearly in our experience of our aging bodies. For some of us this is more clear than for others, depending on where you are in the spectrum of life. But it's equally true for everyone. If we are attached to our bodies staying a certain way, when they change—as they always and will inevitably do for everyone—whether through accidents, whether through illness, whether through the simple process of aging, we suffer. It's so obvious.

If we're holding on to that which in its nature changes, we're going to suffer. It's like someone pulling a rope through your hand—the more you try to hold on, what happens? Rope burn. So do we go through life with rope burn, or are we in harmony, as Anushka was saying last night, with this truth of change?

It's very different and difficult for us, surprisingly difficult, to see that the changes that happen—for example in our bodies but in different circumstances as well—are not a mistake. Very often we're feeling well and things are going along smoothly and then something changes, and a very common response is, "Why me? What did I do wrong that my life, which had been going on so well, all of a sudden has taken a different turn? If only I were a little more on top of things, this wouldn't have happened." But it's not that we've necessarily done anything wrong. It is simply the very nature, the Dharma of things. The Dharma of everything is change. And it's what happens to everyone. It happens to everything.

So seeing this repeatedly, seeing the changing nature—which is what we're doing in our practice, whether we're sitting, whether we're walking, whether we're paying attention to the activities during the day—if we're paying attention to the flow of changes and seeing it more deeply and more clearly and more precisely, it begins to decondition the tendency in the mind to grasp, to hold on, because we see that holding on to that which changes doesn't make sense. It's just the creation of suffering.

What's particularly noteworthy in our lives is that for some reason we are in the habit of holding on even to states of suffering. Why the mind does this is a great mystery. But how often do we justify to ourselves feelings of anger or self-righteousness? "I should be angry. Somebody did this or that." Or we justify to ourselves feelings of jealousy or hatred or envy or pride, as if there's some reason why we should hold on to these states. We're forgetting, or not seeing, that we're the ones who are suffering. Independent of what the external conditions are, if our minds are filled with these emotions, we're the ones who suffer.

On one retreat, many years ago, before I started the retreat I was in a somewhat difficult situation with someone. And so on the retreat, of course, it was coming up a lot—the situation and the person. I would see my mind getting caught in different unpleasant and unskillful emotions. And then I would see it, and my mind would become calm and peaceful. And then the thought would come again, and I'd get lost in whatever the story was. And then I'd get calm and peaceful again. After a while, I just had to start smiling at myself. Peace. Suffering. Oh, let's suffer for a bit. That's what the mind was doing.

The habit is strong, and our practice is to decondition that habit so that we're not caught up in it again and again. Mindfulness and investigation show us that we have a choice. We don't simply have to be carried on the wave of our past conditioning. If we're mindful and we see what's happening, then we have a choice. Do I feed this? Do I simply go on in this pattern? Or can I let it go?

Understanding that we have a choice is a tremendously powerful, transformative insight, because most people don't realize this. Most people are basically slaves to their minds and to whatever patterns of conditioning are there. Mindfulness—exactly that which you're practicing throughout the day—shows us what is arising in the mind, and with a certain wisdom we see: this is wholesome, this leads to more peace or happiness; this is not, this is creating suffering. The seeing of that enables us to cultivate this and let go of that.

Again, from Suzuki Roshi: "Leave your front and back door open. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Just don't serve them tea."

It's not the idea—in fact, if you really let what I'm about to say in, you will save yourself an immense amount of suffering.

The idea in practice is not to stop the thoughts. The idea is not to serve them tea. The thoughts are going to come, but how we're relating to them is up to us.

What's so amazing about the seductive power of the world—and it is very seductive—is that when we look back on our experience, it's so easy to see the impermanent, ephemeral nature of everything that's happened. The experiences we've had a year ago, or a month ago, or a day ago, an hour ago—where are they now? When we look back, this is very clear. We all know this.

But what's so amazing is that when we look ahead in our lives, we often get entranced by all the possibilities, both the pleasant and unpleasant ones. For most of us, this is our lives. This is how we live—leaning forward, looking forward, anticipating, thinking about the next hit of experience. The next event in our lives, the next project, the next day of work, the next relationship, the next problem or difficulty confronting us. How much of our time is spent leaning into some imagined future?

On retreat, we do the same thing. It's on perhaps a smaller scale, but we're practicing often waiting for the next sitting. "Okay, I didn't quite get it this sitting, but I'll wait till the next one, or the next walking." And on an even more refined level—and it would be really interesting for you to observe this—even in sitting we are often leaning into the next breath. We're with this breath, breathing in in order to breathe out, or breathing out in order to breathe in. Of course it's a good idea to keep breathing in and out. But what is the relationship of our mind as we're feeling this, as we're observing it? Are we just with what's happening, or is there that forward lean, that forward tilt? Thinking that somehow the next moment, whatever it may be, is going to resolve everything—even though when we look back, we see that it's all just a passing show. Just as everything that's arisen in the past has come and gone and is gone, everything that we're leaning into will be doing exactly the same thing. So what are we hoping to get?

The paradox of the spiritual life—and this is kind of an interesting thing to observe for ourselves—is that as objects of wanting or desire, whether it's wanting or desiring sense pleasures or meditative pleasures, wanting some meditative experience, we see that all of these things ultimately leave us unfulfilled. Why? Because they're changing. Precisely because they don't last. But the very same experiences that can be objects of desire or wanting can also be objects of mindfulness, whatever they are. It could be sense pleasures. It could be meditative states. If what's arising is an object of mindfulness rather than an object of desire, that very same experience becomes a vehicle for our awakening.

The implication here is that it's not a question of pulling away from experience. That's not what this is about. It's about not holding on to experience. We can be completely engaged in whatever's arising, and our practice is in learning to not hold on.

Liberating insight into the truth of impermanence comes on many levels and in many different ways. We see it in science—the birth and death of stars and of galaxies. They come into being, they have their span of existence, and then they disappear. On the smallest scale, we see or can understand the rapidity of change on the level of subatomic particles.

I want to read you something, just in case you're under the illusion that things are stable and fixed: "Capturing the motion of an electron within an atom sounds like an impossible task. Not least because the shuffling of the electron between orbits, or one that's escaping the nucleus, takes just attoseconds—a billionth of a billionth of a second." That's how fast that change happens. To put this in perspective, an attosecond is to a second what the blink of an eye is to ten billion years. It's unimaginable. That's how fast things are changing. If we think that things are changing in the blink of an eye, that's ten billion years too slow. This is on the most fundamental level of our physical world. This is the speed at which things are changing.

Now it's true that for most of us, in our ordinary perception, we are not going to be picking up change on this level—billionths of a billionth of a second. But still, as mindfulness and concentration and awareness and investigation get stronger, as we look more and more closely at our experience, we begin to see for ourselves, not theoretically and not from some science text, but in our own direct experience, that things are not solid and not fixed, and they're changing much more quickly than we previously noticed.

Even in the ordinary experiences of our lives—taking a breath, or a step, or hearing a sound—it's not just one thing. A breath is not a single event. A step is not a single event. When you hear the bell, how many changes, vibrations, nuances are happening within what we call a single sound? "Oh, I heard the bell." If we're really paying attention, "bell" disappears. Bell is just a concept, and we're simply with that experience, moment to moment to moment.

It's what I call NPMs—Noticings Per Minute. In the beginning, our NPMs are not so high. But as you practice, and you'll see this even in the course of a retreat, our NPMs go way up. Within hearing the sound of a bell, or a step, a single movement, if we're paying attention—it's the only way to perceive it, not to know it intellectually but to actually perceive it—so many different experiences are happening, so many different sensations. Our life is a flow of this.

Here's another way of understanding that things are not always what they appear to be. If we took any ordinary object and looked at it under a high-power microscope, a whole different reality would appear. The conventional notion of what it is disappears, and we see another whole level of what's going on. That's what we're doing in our practice. We're refining the tools of mind so that we're able to see this for ourselves—strengthening the continuity of mindfulness, strengthening the concentration, strengthening the interest in investigation. And so these whole other worlds of how things actually are begin to reveal themselves.

Think of another example. Think of the last time you went to a movie, and you were caught up in the story and the action. If it's a good movie, it probably induced a whole range of emotions and feelings. But when we look more carefully, is there really anyone getting chased, or falling in love, or dying? No. All that's really happening is changing pixels of light on the screen. But it's happening so rapidly that in our perception it forms a picture, and we get so seduced by the picture that we think it's real and we're totally caught up in it. Everything we thought was happening is not really happening at all. It's kind of interesting that we can be so in the delusion of things—and actually pay for it. "Oh, let's go see a good movie tonight."

Now, this is not to suggest that we don't experience or engage with the movies and stories of our lives. That's not what I'm suggesting. It's not that we don't engage with ordinary perception, conventional perception of what's going on. Because we do, and we have to, in order to live in the world. But if at the same time we can also understand the deeper level of what's happening, understanding that there's a more fundamental changing nature, then we don't fall so easily into reactivity and suffering. We're still engaged. We're relating to people and our lives and things that are happening. But when we have this larger perspective, we're able to be with it all with much greater equanimity and ease.

Here's just a little teaching about how to understand these different levels—the movie-story level of our lives and the more underlying reality. This is from a Tibetan master. He said, "It's not that you're not real." We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. You are real—but you think you're *really* real. You exaggerated. So that's the dance. Obviously in our lives we go through everything, we are real, and all the things we're involved with and engaged in. But even as we're fully engaged, can there be that understanding: yes, we're real, but not really real.

And it's that deeper understanding which allows for the possibility of freedom, even as we're engaging with our lives and the world.

Wisdom also arises from a careful attention to impermanence in ways that we already know, that we don't have to particularly look for, but which we often overlook. If we can learn to pay attention in these arenas, just in our ordinary everyday life, that helps refine and stabilize our insight into the truth of change.

When we pay attention, just throughout the day, throughout our lives, we see the changes happening all the time, all around us. Changes in nature—sometimes big changes, and we see the climate change, things that affect the whole planet, or even just the daily changes of weather patterns. On the social level, we can see change in the rise and fall of whole civilizations. It's amazing to think that at one point the Roman Empire was the center of a good part of the world. Where is all that now? And we can look at any culture, any civilization. It's the same because of the truth of change.

You see it in a very beautiful and poignant way in New England. IMS is in central Massachusetts, lots of forests. And IMS is surrounded by a lot of woods. Throughout the woods of New England there are miles and miles, right in the woods, of stone walls and old stone foundations. It's so easy to imagine the life stories of people who built those walls. There are miles and miles of them extending through the woods that have grown up. Or people living in those houses, people living lives as vivid and as compelling as our own. But as you walk through those woods, where are they now? What's left is a stone wall in the forest.

We could look even closer to the changes that are happening in the experience of our relationships. You may fall in love and enter relationship with the expectation that this person is going to stay exactly the way they are when we fell in love with them. Unlikely. We look at the changes in our work, in our bodies and minds. We see that everything is disappearing and new things are arising, not only every year or every month or every day or every hour, but actually in every moment. That's the nature of experience.

So just as an experiment—and this will be a little memory test to see if you can remember between now and the end of the talk—when you leave the hall after the talk, just pay attention to the flow of changing experience that happens. As you go from sitting to standing, how many different sensations are involved in that rather complex maneuver of changing posture? We do it unmindfully, without thinking about it at all, but when you really are paying attention, there are a lot of movements required. And each of those movements is made up of so many different sensations. Then as you walk and leave the hall, just be aware of the changing visual field and all the different

sounds that come and go, and be aware of maybe the different thoughts that are passing through. Just in this simple process of getting up and leaving the hall, you can hone in on the truth of change, the truth of impermanence in a very profound way.

So it's not something that we have to wait and practice twenty years for. It's simply a matter of paying careful attention. And really that's what we're practicing, because we haven't been taught that for the most part. Mostly we're just kind of coasting along on the surface of things. But the truth of change is so ordinary. It's so much the fabric of everything—our lives, our minds, our bodies, the world. Everything is changing. Because it's so ordinary, for the most part we've stopped paying attention to it. And so we're missing the opportunity to actually understand deeply the truth of this.

Being on retreat is just a fantastic gift that you've given yourselves, because you only have one job. You have no responsibilities other than to pay attention and just be mindful of what's arising and notice the truth of change. Is anybody still confused about this? It's very simple, but as my first teacher, Munindraji, would say very often, it's simple but not easy. It's not complicated, but it's not easy because our minds have not been trained to pay attention in this careful way.

The clearer we perceive impermanence and the more we practice seeing it on all levels as it's happening, the less we cling. The less we cling, the less we suffer.

So here is the Buddhist description of the enlightened mind. It's a very simple description. The Buddha said, "In seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. When it's not agitated, it personally attains nibbana—freedom, peace."

It's helpful to understand this not simply as a description, but also as an instruction. "In seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling." So what's the instruction here? The instruction is to really notice those times when you are in the awareness of the flow of phenomena. It could be in taking a step, and the mind is just there easily, experiencing the flow of changing sensations. Or in a breath. Or in a more choiceless, open awareness where we see things coming and going.

See if you can remember, the next time you're in this kind of easeful flow of change, to look back at the mind and notice whether in those times of seeing impermanence, the mind is clinging or not. You're checking this out. You're not just believing what the Buddha says—you're really checking your own mind. Is the mind clinging as I'm seeing impermanence, or not?

Probably I shouldn't tell you this, but most likely you'll see that it's not clinging. Because if you were clinging, you would be outside the flow of change again. It's like you would be damming it up. But really see for yourself, because it will give you a taste and direct experience of what the non-clinging mind is. You'll actually be feeling it and experiencing it.

So that's the first part of the instruction: just really look to see how the mind is when it's seeing impermanence. "Oh, not clinging." Then do the second step, the second instruction. When you experience that the mind is not clinging, see for yourself—at that time, is the mind agitated or not agitated? Hint: not agitated. But again, don't believe it. Check it out. It's very illuminating to experience this for ourselves.

And even if it's just for short moments, this does not have to be some big state that you're entering into for the rest of the retreat. It can be a few minutes seeing impermanence and seeing that the mind is not clinging. In experiencing the mind of not clinging, really notice, "Oh, the mind's not agitated now." And when you're experiencing that non-agitation, right then you are in the field, the arena of nibbana. Non-agitation is kind of the foretaste of nibbana.

It's only by applying the teachings in this way, where we take these descriptions and then take them as instructions and check them out—that's when we make the teachings our own. It's not just a question of reading something and believing it or not believing it. We're really testing it and saying, "Okay, is this true? And is this true in my own experience?"

There's another aspect to check out. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, that discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha suggests regarding the hindrances—which are mind states we've referred to, states of desire or aversion or sleepiness or restlessness or doubt, those things which obstruct clear awareness—the Buddha says to be aware when they're arising and present, so we actually make them the object of meditation. But also be aware when they're not present, when our mind is not filled with desire or aversion, not sleepy or restless or doubting.

This is important because we often overlook those times. It's like our mind is always looking for trouble. But those times when we're actually in quite a peaceful state and we're just there in a very simple way—notice that. Notice that quality of ease, of calm.

Buddhadasa, who was a great Thai monk of the last century, called these moments of peace, when we really are noticing that the hindrances are absent, "temporary nibbana." He talked of the use of this word nibbana—in ancient India, that word was used in a colloquial fashion to mean "cooled down." People would refer, if they were cooking

rice and the hot rice cooled down, they would say the rice is nibbana'd. It's really beautiful just to see: yes, sometimes our minds are heated up, and sometimes our minds are cooled down. Don't overlook that. You can appreciate this temporary coolness, this temporary nibbana.

Don't underestimate the importance of seeing, and practicing seeing, and refining our seeing of the truth of change on all of these different levels—whether it's externally in nature, whether it's the circumstances of our lives, whether it's the flow of our own mind-body experience. Don't underestimate the importance of noticing that everything is arising and passing away. Through seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it is not agitated.

When it is not agitated, it personally experiences nibbāna, the coolness.

There was a very famous monk in Burma who lived at the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s. His name was Ledi Sayadaw—that's L-E-D-I. Very famous. He was reputed to be a great enlightened master as well as a great scholar. You could search for his writings online and find a massive amount of his teachings. If you wanted to really explore in great depth the Buddhist teachings, his work is fantastic.

He said, "Not seeing arising and passing away—not seeing that things are just coming and going—is ignorance. While seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening."

This is really important to let in, because we can hear all this talk about impermanence and it's so easy for the mind to think, "Oh yeah, I know that. I know things are changing." But that's missing the profound nature of seeing it and perceiving it moment to moment, directly for ourselves. Not seeing that is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening. It's a doorway for us.

And this is from the Dhammapada, which is a collection of verses of the Buddha. He said, "Fully knowing the arising and passing of all experience, fully knowing that, one attains joy and delight. For those who know, this is the deathless."

So this is not an insignificant thing. Again, even though the notion of impermanence is not foreign to us—we know that things change—all of these teachings point to how profoundly transformative it is to really be seeing it deeply and clearly, moment to moment. And that's the opportunity you have here on retreat. As I said, there's nothing else to do except be paying careful attention to what's already happening. You don't have to create it. This is what's happening. Can we just settle into the awareness of it?

There is some careful observation of other obvious truths of change, of impermanence—some reflections which can jolt us out of complacency, because we are in the habit of living our lives complacently with regard to these truths. We get so busy and caught up and engaged in our lives, and so all of this goes on the back burner. There are a few reflections which can help jolt us into a state of greater attentiveness.

Probably the most obvious and ignored reflection on impermanence is that the end of birth is death. Who didn't know that? We all know that. How often do we reflect on it? That our lives are only getting shorter and shorter every day.

You know the great Indian classic, the Mahabharata? It's an epic work. In that work, one of the great Indian sages makes the comment that one of the most remarkable things in the world is that we see people all around us dying, but we don't think it's going to happen to us. We know intellectually it will, but we're not living that understanding.

I want to read something—a story about Henry David Thoreau. Many of you may know that he died at forty-four from tuberculosis, quite young and very ill. This is from a book about his life and his death:

"Henry was never affected or reached by his illness. Very often I have heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever. He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health."

Just that. That's a remarkable understanding—that the awareness could hold perfect health and perfect disease, and the awareness was not affected. That's quite remarkable.

"The thought of death, he said, could not begin to trouble him. One friend, as if by way of consolation, said to him, 'Well, Mr. Thoreau, we must all go.'"

And Henry replied, "When I was a very little boy, I learned that I must die. So, of course, I am not disappointed now. Death is as near to you as it is to me."

Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves. When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, aunt."

So really what we're doing here is learning that we have no quarrel. We don't need to quarrel. You could call it God, you could call it the Dharma, you could call it the truth. Yes, birth and death—the end of birth is death. This is not a tragedy. It's just the Dharma. It's the way things are. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. "I did not know that we had ever quarreled." Can we come to an understanding like that?

The Buddha offered some powerful reflections to help us open to that space, to that understanding. I found these reflections so effective, and they're very simple. The Buddha suggested reflecting: What is subject to old age will grow old, and I am not exempt. What is subject to illness will become ill, and I am not exempt. What is subject to death will die, and I am not exempt.

We're all familiar with the first part of those phrases. It's not a problem for us. Whatever has the nature to grow old or ill or die, those things will happen. It's the second part that's the hook. Because in some deep way, we think we are exempt, or at least should be.

I've seen this so often in life and in meditation. I can be doing walking meditation, and all of a sudden my hip will hurt or my knee will hurt. Why did that happen? And then I'll just call to mind the phrase: and I am not exempt. This is the nature of things.

So I suggest, if you like, you can just practice with that phrase. And I'm not exempt. I'm not exempt from the truth. I'm not exempt from the way things are.

What's so surprising is that given how obvious the truth of change is, we are still surprised by change—that somehow we count on things staying a certain way, or if they're going to change, they're going to change according to our liking. Sometimes they do, but often they don't. And I am not exempt.

Given this great truth of change, what does it really say about how we're living our lives? About what we rely on, about the choices we make?

Just as a little experiment sometime, you might imagine yourselves on your deathbed. And for the sake of the experiment, let's all be comfortable. We're in bed, but we're dying. It's our last few breaths. Just imagine actually being on our deathbed and reflect: What would you have wanted to have done in your life? Looking back from that perspective, what is really important?

These are questions that each one of us has to ask for ourselves. There's no one right answer. But these are important questions, and it's important to ask them now—because if we wait until we're dying, it's too late. We can use these reflections to really

help wake us up to our lives, to how we're living, the choices we make, and how we're relating to one another. How will I have wanted to have lived? This is a powerful question for us.

The liberating power of seeing impermanence was expressed in one very startling statement of the Buddha's. He said it's better to live a single day seeing the rapid arising and passing of phenomena than to live a hundred years without seeing it. Isn't that amazing?

I mean, with all the good things that we could do in a hundred years of life, the Buddha is saying it's better to live a single day seeing the truth of change on that momentary level than to live a hundred years without it. Why? Because it's precisely that seeing which is the doorway to liberation.

We begin to see that this truth of change is the nature of life itself. And seeing it clearly and repeatedly reorients our lives and our minds towards care and loving-kindness rather than attachment. It reorients our lives and our minds to letting go rather than clinging, rather than holding on. Seeing impermanence really reorients us towards freedom.

I'd like to close with this one teaching from a Tibetan master, Dzigar Kongtrül. He said, "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself."

The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you."

This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you. That's what we're doing here—really practicing. Practicing seeing. Practicing awakening.

So let's just sit for a few moments and let the mind nibbāna out. Cooling. Relaxing into the flow of changing experience.

CHAPTER 8

# Collage (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · 56 min

> *In this rich dharma talk from a Spirit Rock retreat, Joseph Goldstein weaves together multiple contemplative threads into what he calls a 'collage' of profound practice insights. The talk begins with an exploration of anattā (not-self) through the memorable analogy of the Big Dipper—just as the constellation exists only as a conceptual overlay on points of light, so too does the sense of self arise from misperceiving the flow of experience.*
>
> *Goldstein offers four distinct methods for investigating the selfless nature of consciousness: observing the pairwise progression of knowing and object arising together moment by moment; understanding how consciousness arises dependently from causes (sense organ, object, contact, and attention); the Zen approach of looking for the mind and finding nothing (illustrated through the famous Bodhidharma-Huìkě dialogue); and reframing experience in the passive voice—'sensations being known' rather than 'I am knowing sensations'—which removes the subject and reveals effortless awareness.*
>
> *The teaching deepens with reflection on the phrase 'whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away,' revealing how subtle craving for becoming keeps us leaning into the next moment rather than resting in non-craving. Using the image of a river flowing to the ocean, Goldstein describes how we move between the current of impermanence and the eddies of self-identification. He concludes with the observation that passing thoughts function like momentary dreams—we are literally dreaming ourselves into existence—and that mindful attention to these fleeting self-referential thoughts is a direct path to awakening from the dream of self.*

Tonight's talk is a bit of a collage of topics that are of interest to me. I hope they'll be of some interest to you.

I want to start with a quote by John Lennon, which is only peripherally related to the talk. "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment. And I told them they didn't understand life."

So tonight's talk is a bit about understanding life, and perhaps happiness. It builds on Anushka's talk last night, which outlined the five aggregates—a template that the Buddha gave very often. It's found frequently in the suttas and discourses as a way of beginning to understand the notion of selflessness.

In the teachings, impermanence is easy to understand. Even if we have not fully actualized it in the way we live, it's not a difficult concept to grasp. And dukkha is not hard to grasp—we all have a very immediate experience of it. But the teachings on selflessness are not intuitively obvious. In a way, they go against our common sense experience of things. You could go up to anybody on the street and ask them whether things are impermanent or whether there are difficulties in life, and of course they would agree. But if you go up and ask them, "Do you really exist?" that would raise some questions.

In talking about selflessness, the first and important thing to realize is that the self is not something we need to get rid of. It really is not there in the first place, and we are misperceiving our experience.

An example which I have been giving for the last forty-two years—some of you have probably heard it that many times—is the example of the constellation, the Big Dipper. You're all familiar with the Big Dipper? On a clear night, you look up at the sky and you see that constellation.

So what is this, the sixth or seventh day of the retreat? This is a little midterm exam: Is there really a Big Dipper up in the sky?

There's no Big Dipper. There are some points of light, which we take to be stars, in a certain pattern. We see the pattern in a certain way, and we give it the name "Big Dipper." But when you realize that there's no Big Dipper, does anything change in the sky? No. Everything is as it always was. We're just seeing it more clearly, in the sense that we're seeing it free of concepts. This is not to say that concepts are not useful, because if you happen to be in the middle of the Pacific Ocean navigating a canoe, the Big Dipper points to the North Star, and you can navigate that way. So concepts can be useful, but it's important to realize that it is a concept.

The self is not something we need to get rid of. It's not there in the first place. Self is like Big Dipper. The real question and source of investigation is how the sense of self is created in the first place. What are we doing in our experience that gives rise to the feeling of self, the sense of self, which we all have and in which we all live?

Over these last days, we've been talking a lot—and I think you've experienced very often—that as experience unfolds, we have the tendency at different times, often frequently, to identify with what's arising as being I, as being self. It's that mental process of identifying that creates the felt sense of self. "My body," or "I'm feeling these sensations," "my thought," "my emotions."

I mentioned the other night the famous Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw. At one point in his writings, he listed—it was a long list—very common experiences, all of which he called wrong view. What was on the list? "I'm angry, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm excited, I'm enthusiastic, I'm bored"—and on and on. This is just the normal way we experience things. What's the wrong view? The "I." Claiming these emotions as being self, as being I, rather than seeing the experience as it is: anger angers, fear fears, love loves. Each quality is expressing its own nature. None of them belong to anyone.

You might have seen over these last days, and gotten a glimpse, that sensations come and go and you can sometimes be with them without personalizing them. Perhaps you've seen thoughts arising and passing away and begun to get a sense that they're coming from the person behind you—that they're not really yours.

And perhaps you've had a sense with different emotions—seeing how they arise out of conditions and pass away—and getting a glimpse of their selflessness.

But the hardest place to understand selflessness, to deconstruct that sense of I, is in our relationship to consciousness, to knowing. Because even as we see all of these other experiences arising and passing, and perhaps getting a glimpse of their non-self aspect, still there's that strong feeling: *I'm* the one knowing it all. And so we create that sense of the observer or the witness, and that's where the I resides. You could think of consciousness or awareness or knowing as the last hideout of self—the most difficult place to see clearly without identifying with it.

So tonight I'd like to talk about four different ways of working with knowing, working with consciousness, with awareness, in ways that could help us understand it without taking it to be I, without identifying with it. These different approaches come from different traditions. Different Buddhist traditions have different methodologies for understanding this.

The first one is a very classical teaching in the Theravada tradition: the understanding that in every moment, two things are happening. There's knowing and an object arising simultaneously. What is hearing? There's knowing of a sound. What is seeing? Knowing of a sight, knowing of a smell, a taste, knowing of a sensation, knowing of a

thought. Our experience—and this is one of the insights that happens in the course of vipassana unfolding—is this pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

Now it's important to understand that the knowing and the object are distinct but not separable. They're two different things. This is a rather strange example, but if you lifted the arm of a corpse, the movement would be there—the physical sense of movement would be there. But is there any knowing? As far as we can tell, not. The corpse doesn't know anything, and yet the physical movement is there. So when we move our arms, there's the same movement, but something else is there as well: the knowing of the movement.

So far so good? Just knowing an object. They're arising simultaneously. You can't separate them, but they're two distinct phenomena. It's kind of like when you look at something that has both color and form. But are color and form the same thing? No. They're two distinct aspects. But you can't separate them—the color is always in a form, and the form has a color. So they're two inseparable but distinct aspects. This mind-body, this process of knowing an object, is like that. They're arising simultaneously. We can't separate them, but they are distinguishable.

And so when you're sitting or walking, you might give emphasis to really seeing and examining, or just recognizing, that in any moment this is what's happening: there's a knowing and an object. Knowing and an object. You're taking a step—there's the movement and the knowing of it. Taking a breath—there's the sensations and the knowing of them.

As the mindfulness gets stronger, we begin to see with greater and greater clarity this process: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, very quickly arising and passing. This is a very important stage in the progress of insight because it is the first real glimpse of selflessness. We see that all that there is is this progression of knowing an object, knowing an object. It's not that it's happening to someone; what we are is this process of knowing an object arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing. And so it gives a real taste of the selflessness of consciousness because we see that it's actually arising and passing in each moment.

This is one way into beginning our understanding of not being identified with knowing, not creating a knower. That's one avenue in.

Another avenue is to see the constructed nature of consciousness—that knowing or consciousness arises out of causes.

And the Buddha laid out pretty clearly what the causes were for consciousness to arise.

I first explored this particular aspect when I was on retreat at the Forest Refuge in Barre. I was in the dining room eating, and I made a little thought experiment. This is a sidebar: even though we encourage you not to get lost in thought, it's not to say that thought cannot be a very useful tool of reflection and investigation. Some years ago I read the biography of Einstein, and it's quite amazing. His brilliant understanding of the nature of the universe came through thought experiments. He wasn't an experimental physicist. It was this amazingly creative and intuitive understanding that came through thought experiments.

So my own thought experiment in the dining room of the Forest Refuge does not quite rise to the level of Einstein, but it rises to the level of Goldstein.

Taste consciousness. Eating, just watching the process of eating. I don't know if you've really paid attention, but it's amazing what the tongue does. It is the strangest organ, this thing in the mouth. I've been told—I'm not sure this is true—that the tongue is the strongest muscle in the body. But it's certainly very effective.

So how does taste consciousness arise? The Buddha explained it arises when four conditions are present. We need the tongue. We need food on the tongue. We need some moisture, saliva. And we need attention. If those four conditions are there, taste consciousness will arise.

I did a little thought experiment. Knowing that, I was just eating and simply imagined where the taste would arise if there were no tongue. Obviously not. Or if there were no attention. If I took any one of those conditions away, taste consciousness wouldn't be there.

We can do this with all of the sense doors. How does seeing consciousness arise? We have the working organ of the eyes. We have something coming in front. There's light and attention. If those four conditions are there, seeing consciousness will arise. Take any one of those conditions away, we don't see.

I often do this when I'm going for a walk. I'll just play at the different sense doors using this little thought experiment, taking one of the causal conditions away, and it becomes so clear. It's like a moment of popping through, of realizing that consciousness, the knowing, is itself conditioned. It's conditioned by these causes, and take any one of those causes away, the consciousness is not there.

So that's another way of understanding the not-self nature of it. There's no "I" in that mix. It's just causes. Causes come together, consciousness arises. That's the second way we can begin to experiment and really look for ourselves, investigate for ourselves.

The third way now moves into the teachings of another tradition. It's found more in some of the Zen traditions and Tibetan traditions, where the suggestion for investigation is to look for the mind, to look for the knowing, to look for the awareness, and see if you can find it.

There's a very famous Zen dialogue, actually from China, Chan. Bodhidharma brought Buddhism from India to China. He was reputedly this very fierce guy sitting in a cave for nine years. A seeker came to him named Huike. Huike was in great distress, and at first Bodhidharma was just ignoring him. As this rather weird legend goes, Huike cut off his arm to show his sincerity. So Bodhidharma agreed to come out of his cave. We're much easier. And Huike says, "Venerable sir, I'm in such distress."

I'm suffering so much. Please pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind and I'll pacify it."

Huike says, "I've looked for it everywhere and I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There, I've pacified it."

Now before I proceed—the dialogue goes back and forth a couple of times, and in the end it sounds like a little witticism, so people often just take it on that level. But it's actually a profound truth. Try to hear it in that way.

This is a very direct pointing. When we look for the mind, there's nothing to find. When we look for the knowing, it can't be found. When you look for awareness, you can't find it—and yet the knowing is there.

In some traditions, they refer to that non-findability as an experience of emptiness. Different traditions use the term "emptiness" in different ways, but it's very interesting. When you're sitting, I enjoy doing this a lot with sound. If I'm sitting and sounds are just arising, sometimes I'll ask myself the question: Can I find what's knowing the sound? I know I'm knowing it because I'm hearing. But then when I look to see—can I find what it is that's knowing?—there's nothing to find, even though the knowing is there.

When we begin to experience the non-findability of awareness, of knowing, that's another doorway into understanding its selfless nature. There's nothing there to find, even as knowing happens. So that's the third way to look for the mind.

The fourth way is something that came to me quite a few years ago in my practice, and it really transformed my practice. It was simply a turn of language—how I was languaging things to myself.

There's an interesting quote by Wittgenstein: "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." How we language things conditions how we experience things, but we are so immersed in our language from very early on that we don't even see how it shapes our perception.

The big turn for me came—I don't know what gave rise to the thought—but usually we language our experience in the active voice. "I'm seeing, I'm hearing, I'm doing this, I'm going there." There's a subject, a verb, and an object. I started reframing, re-languaging things in the passive voice. For example, in walking: "sensations being known"—not "I'm knowing the sensations." In the movement, the sensations are being known.

In re-languaging it that way to myself and actually practicing within that framework, there were some quite remarkable consequences. One is that everything is being known completely effortlessly. Just as a little experiment, if you move your arm with that frame, you could say, "the movement, sensations being known." Aren't they being known just as you're moving? You can move fast, you can dance, or you can move really slowly—and they're just being known. All by itself. Completely effortless.

And not only is it effortless, you begin to see that experience is being known exactly in the moment of its arising. The knowing doesn't lag, it's not ahead—precisely as it's happening, it's being known. And no one's doing anything. There's this effortlessness, this precision, this exactitude to it.

I would experiment with this a little bit, if you're interested—both in the sitting, with the sensation of the breath being known, and in walking, where the movement is so obvious and just being known. If you get to a place—and this is not difficult—where it's just happening really easily for you, that's simply the language construct through which you're experiencing things. Just things being known, moment after moment: a movement, a sound, a thought—things being known.

If you practice just a little bit and you find it easeful, then you could ask a very telling question: Things are being known—known by what? You're turning the attention back towards the knowing. And again we find the same thing as Huike: Known by what?

There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is there. This is the great mystery of awareness, the great mystery of consciousness. This passive voice construction and practicing in that way can give a very immediate sense of the selflessness of the whole process, the selflessness of knowing. No one's doing anything.

The great contribution of the passive voice, which is generally unacknowledged in society at large, is that there's no subject. It takes the subject out of the picture. And so we're just in this experience of things being known moment after moment, being known effortlessly, no one there. Some people might call that a non-dual awareness or selfless awareness because there's no subject, there's no "I" in that experience. So that's another way you can begin to explore this.

Just a quick recap. Four different approaches to beginning to explore the selflessness of consciousness, the selflessness of awareness. One is the insight into the fact that this process is just a sequence, a pairwise progression—moment after moment, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. You can really be with your experience in that way. Notice this. This is how it's happening. You don't have to create it. It's just to notice that in every moment, that's what's happening, and that's all that's happening. And it's not happening to someone. What we are is that process—knowing an object, knowing an object.

Second, causes and conditions: to see how consciousness arises because of different causes, and you can check that out through the different examples I mentioned.

Third, you might play the role or the little dialogue in your mind of Bodhidharma and Huike. Sometimes I'll use that dialogue. If I'm going along and my mind is disturbed by something, or just caught up in something—being very familiar with that whole dialogue of "I'm suffering, please pacify my mind," "Show me your mind," "Nothing to find," "Already pacified"—I've just used the shorthand. When I'm right in the middle of something, I'll just say to myself, "Already pacified." And it reminds me that if you look for the mind, there's nothing to find. In that nothing to find, there's no problem. Just a little phrase that a Sri Lankan monk once used—he said, "No self, no problem." And we can drop into that space, even if it's just for a few moments at a time. So: already pacified.

And then the fourth is that practice of reframing your experience as you're going along in that passive voice, of just different things being known. I would highly recommend particularly this last one, because once you settle into that frame, the practice becomes so effortless. We've taken the "I" out of the whole process—the "I" which is strug-

gling to be mindful and struggling in whatever way you struggle. It's just things being known, moment after moment. There's a great lightness and ease in that way of practice.

The second part of the collage. This first one had to do with practicing, investigating, not identifying with consciousness, seeing the selfless nature of awareness. The second topic of interest actually arose just in my last retreat. Over the winter I was sitting for about six weeks, and a line of the teachings came to mind which I mentioned in the earlier talk. This is a line that you find often in the suttas: when somebody got enlightened, they would often express their enlightenment with the phrase, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Remember I talked about that in the impermanence talk. You find this line very often.

So I was sitting, and it came to mind. Usually I would read that line simply as a description—people describing the nature of things. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Yes, got that. But in this particular sitting, I took that line more as an instruction. Right in the sitting, as I was just there in the flow of experience—different sensations and sounds and thoughts, all the experiences of our practice—I was there in the flow of it, and I dropped this sentence right in the middle: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." And something quite

unexpected happened. What is the implication of that sentence? Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. When I dropped it right into the middle of my practice, it became crystal clear that there is nothing to want, because whatever I might want will also pass away.

In the context of meditation, there's a phenomenon that is very common. Probably most of you are practicing in this way, and certainly I've seen it in myself very often. Being in the flow of experience, but with a slight leaning into the next moment. It's like we're with the breath in order for the next breath. Or we're with a sensation in order for it to unfold in a certain way. Or we're with an emotion for something. There's what I call the "in order to" mind—we're with this in order for something. It can be very subtle, the subtlest energetic leaning into the process.

The Buddha called this, in the Second Noble Truth when he talked about the cause of suffering, craving. The first kind of craving we're very familiar with is just the craving for sense pleasures. But the second is more subtle and more pervasive. He called it craving for becoming. There's a wanting something to happen, a sense that this is leading someplace.

When I dropped this line in—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—it's like there is nothing to become, because whatever it is will also pass away. And so for that moment, the mind just stopped that forward lean. The Four Noble Truths in that moment became so clarified. It became so clear that this craving for becoming, even on a moment-to-moment level, is what keeps us on this whole whirlwind of samsara. We're craving the next moment, and the next moment, and the next moment.

This illuminated the essence of the practice. If you get this, you've got everything. The essence of the practice is not becoming anything. It's not having some new meditative experience, because whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. The essence of the practice is in not craving anything. It's that dropping back into not wanting.

This was very surprising. I had no idea that this would come just from dropping that phrase into my mind. You might want to experiment with that. Do you have that sense, as you practice, of how often there's a leaning—just a subtle sense that we're with this in order for something? We think that's what the meditation is about, to become something. But the freedom is exactly the opposite. The freedom is in not becoming, not craving.

We can do this anytime. You can touch the deepest aspects of the practice in any moment when you realize that it's this—this is the move, not that. So you might experiment with that and see if it's useful for you.

That's the second part of the collage. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—really using the implications of that very profound statement. It's not just a throwaway line. It's pointing to the very essence of the practice.

The third aspect came from reading a series of talks by a Sri Lankan monk named Ñāṇananda. He's a very revered monk in Sri Lanka, deeply immersed in the suttas and the texts, knowing them perfectly and very accomplished in his practice. He gave a series of lectures—I think it was something like thirty-six or thirty-seven lectures on Nibbāna.

So I thought, oh, this will be interesting. It was a mind stretch. You can go to "Ajahn Google," and they're all online. It's amazing—you want thirty-seven lectures on Nibbana? There they are. They are a mind stretch. He was talking about the Dharma in ways that were so unusual and so subtle. I really needed to be reading it when I was in a very quiet practice space, trying to really understand the words.

But in all of those lectures, there's one image he used which I found very useful in my practice, and that's what I want to mention this evening.

He used the image of a river flowing to the ocean. You could think of that as the stream leading to Nibbana. So we're in the stream. But what is this river? What is this stream? It's when we are in the flow of impermanence—when we're just in our experience, in that flow of things arising and passing, arising and passing, just going along with no obstructions. We're in the flow, we're in the current. And in fact, that is the current leading to Nibbana.

Then he used the example of what happens when the current of the water hits an obstacle, like a rock. As the water goes over the rock, it creates a little vortex, and sometimes an eddy, where the current goes in the opposite direction to the main flow. He used this example of the vortex and the eddy for those times when we're in the flow of impermanence, but then we get caught by something creating the sense of self. We're no longer in the flow; instead, we're in the eddy, going around and around in whatever our little story or fixation or attachment is, until at a certain point we come out of the eddy and are back in the flow of impermanence.

As a kind of example of this, years ago I was on a whitewater rafting trip up in—I can't remember exactly—I think it was the Snake River up in Idaho. Along with the main rafts, the guides had these little flimsy rubber kayaks that people could go in individually just to play in the river. I thought, oh, that looks like fun. So I get into one and I'm kind of paddling, and then the guide shouts out to me, "Watch out for the hole in the river!" I had no idea what he was talking about. I'm from central Massachusetts; it didn't mean anything to me. Until a few moments later. Because the water current was going over something and into a vortex, I was really pulled down. I was pulled down under the water. Fortunately, I was wearing a life vest. That popped me back up. The vortex pulled me down again. Then again, the life jacket popped me up and I was back in the stream.

So in our practice, when we get caught—whether it's in the vortex or in the eddy—mindfulness is like that life jacket. Mindfulness is the life vest. When we get caught and we remember to be mindful, we disidentify with whatever it is that's arising and we're back in the flow of the current towards Nibbana.

I found it very interesting, both in the sitting, in the walking, and in moving about, to watch for that change of experience—to just be paying attention. We're in the flow and everything is going along smoothly, and then something happens and we're no longer in that forward-moving current. Maybe we're lost in some thought, some story, or we're caught up in some reaction. I even noticed that I could be going along and then if I have a task to do, just that would often prompt the fall into the vortex. "Oh, I have a purpose now in doing something." It's so easy in that moment.

You might notice this when you're in your room doing different things, or in your work. Do you keep that sense of the forward flow, of just the flow of impermanence through all those activities, or do things get solidified? There's a self here, and I have to do something. It becomes very interesting to watch the alternation of being in the forward current

and then caught in an eddy of self, or whirlpool of self, and then at a certain point recognizing that, and then back in the current again. It became a very visceral way, a visceral feedback for when I was caught. And so you might, if it's of interest, just play with that.

This is the last of the collage. Have you had the experience sometimes of waking up in the morning and then just for a few moments or a couple of minutes, dropping back to sleep again, a quick little dream in that space, and then again waking up and being awake? I think that's fairly common, except for really good yogis who pop up totally awake.

So I was having the not-so-good yogi experience of dropping back to sleep and a little dream. This was while I was on retreat. Then I was doing walking meditation, and I began to notice just the quickly passing thoughts that came through. They weren't disturbing. They were really light, not a whole big story. Just walking and—*shh*—a thought passes.

I realized that for the most part, I really was not paying attention to that phenomena because they were not disturbing. It didn't feel like they were pulling me out of the current. But when I looked more carefully at those kinds of thoughts, which happen innumerable times during the day, I realized that for those moments of being lost, it was exactly the same experience as going back into the dream state after waking. It felt exactly the same. You're awake and then you're asleep for a couple of moments with a little dream, and then you're awake again. Going along, a thought comes through, and even if it's quick, if we're not aware of it, in that moment it's as if we dropped into a momentary dream state. And then we're out and we're back with what's happening.

And then I noticed something else about these thoughts—that mostly, or certainly a good many of them, were self-referential in some way. Not particularly in a disturbing way or a big way, but maybe it was planning or just commenting on something. Many of the thoughts had a sense of self in the content. And so I realized that for all these times, in walking and moving about the day with all these very many passing thoughts, many of which have some idea of self in them, I was dreaming myself into existence. I was dreaming the self into existence.

So I started using that phrase throughout the day: stop dreaming yourself into existence. But what that takes—and again, I recommend this, it would really refine your practice a lot, not only here on retreat but in our lives in the world—is to give some attention, really set the intention to keep an eye out for these quick thoughts that go by, whether in the sitting or the walking. It's really a fun game because they're happening frequently, so it wakes us up frequently if we're actually paying attention to them. And it becomes so clear that when we're lost in a thought, we're in a dream. It becomes so clear through the observation of that process.

So this is another suggestion for practice. And it's another way of understanding or tapping into the experience of selflessness, because so much of the sense of self comes in these dreamlike thoughts. We are dreaming the self into existence. And in that sense, when we're paying attention to that, we are really waking up from the dream.

These were the topics of interest. I'll just close with a little reading from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the greatest of the Tibetan masters of the last century. His writings are profound and clear; he's a brilliant teacher.

He said: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes—the idea of an enduring self. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that view of I, you would find it easy to be free and to free others too. Use any practice you do to dissolve this idea of I and the self-oriented motivations that accompany it."

That's really an important line. As long as that sense of I, sense of self, is there and strong, so many of the motivations in our lives are rooted in that self-center. Use any practice you do to dissolve this idea of I and the self-oriented motivations that accompany it.

And this last line is really applicable: "Even if you do not succeed in the beginning, keep trying."

At one point at our center in Barre, the Insight Meditation Society, we received a letter addressed to the Instant Meditation Society.

You might reflect back on Kamala's great talk on patience. This is a process. Everything I've spoken about today is an unfolding process of understanding.

So let's sit together for just a few minutes.

CHAPTER 9

# What Mindfulness Is and What It Isn't

Joseph Goldstein · 58 min

> *In this comprehensive talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses common misconceptions about mindfulness (sati) by examining what this crucial quality of mind truly entails. He begins by noting that while 'living in the present moment' is a starting point, it's insufficient—what he playfully calls 'black lab consciousness.' True mindfulness requires an observing power of mind where we know that we're knowing, combined with the crucial element of being free from the filters of greed, aversion, and delusion.*
>
> *Goldstein makes a vital distinction between recognition and mindfulness, sharing his years-long struggle with fear during practice. Though he recognized the fear and noted it, he wasn't truly mindful because subtle aversion—wanting it to go away—remained unconscious. The breakthrough came only when he could genuinely accept: 'If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay.' He offers practical tools for moving from recognition to mindfulness: softening the tone of mental notes, and asking 'What's the attitude in the mind now?'*
>
> *Drawing on teachings from his teacher Anagarika Munindraji, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya, as well as insights from Henry David Thoreau and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, Goldstein illuminates how mindfulness becomes a vehicle for liberation. When we truly see impermanence, the mind doesn't cling; when it doesn't cling, it's not agitated; and when not agitated, we personally experience Nibbāna. The talk emphasizes that in meditation, what matters is not what experience arises, but how we relate to it.*

Given the explosion of interest in mindfulness during these past few years, I thought it would be helpful to explore some of the nuances and subtleties of what mindfulness actually is and what it isn't. There's often some confusion about what mindfulness means, and it's important to understand the meaning or essence of it as a methodology for liberation. That's why we're practicing it.

As you know, the practice of mindfulness has its roots in the teachings of the Buddha 2,600 years ago, and it's quite amazing to see its relevance and application these thousands of years later. Clearly there's something of critical importance in understanding this mind state.

I was once asked to describe mindfulness in just a few words. That's a bit like asking someone to describe in a few words what art is, or what love is. It's not easy to break it down into just a few brief sentences. The first response that often comes to mind for most people when asked "What is mindfulness?" is "Well, it's living in the present moment—not being lost or carried away by our thoughts, not living in the past, not living in the future." This is a good place to start. That's the starting place for what mindfulness is: living in the present moment. But that by itself is not enough.

There's something I call "black lab consciousness." You're familiar with the dogs—Black Labs or Golden Retrievers. They're very friendly, very playful, really a delight to be with. But when you watch them, they are in the present moment. They're not in the past, they're not in the future. They're just engaged with their sense objects. What I'm about to say may be a projection, but I think it's true: they don't look very mindful. They're in the present, but there's something missing in terms of mindfulness.

So what is it that's missing? There's a Portuguese poet named Fernando Pessoa, and the first few lines of one of his poems really captured my attention in this regard. He said: "Live, you say, in the present. Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality." This points to something essential—that living in the present is not sufficient. It's necessary, but not sufficient.

So what takes us from black lab consciousness to the quality of mind that actually leads us to awakening? One added element which we bring into living in the present is that observing power of the mind where we know that we're knowing. We're not just lost in different experiences; we actually know that we're knowing. We might call this metacognition—a kind of stepping back or understanding, being aware that we're aware.

One way of understanding this very clearly is seeing the difference in your experience between being lost in a thought and being aware that you're thinking. In both cases, thoughts are happening. Thoughts are the object; that's what the experience of thinking is. But in the first situation, we're not aware that we're thinking—we're totally caught up in it. In the second, thinking is still there, but there's awareness: thinking, thinking. We know that we're thinking. This is that added observing power of the mind.

Sometimes this is easiest to experience in walking meditation or just walking about. Have you ever gone five or ten or fifteen steps without even knowing that you're walking, lost in some train of thought, some ideation? We can go for quite a distance—ten steps, fifteen steps later—and then: "Oh, I've been thinking." In all that time, we were not aware either that we were thinking or what our bodily experience was. We've just been subsumed in being lost.

This observing power of mindfulness, when we know that we're knowing what's there, opens up some really interesting possibilities of investigation. And one of my favorites, which has profound implications—

Is the simple inquiry, the question: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, not the content, but what is a thought as a phenomenon?

This is a question not very many people ask themselves. We go through our whole lives thinking, and maybe occasionally being aware that we're thinking, but how often do we really look at the thought and ask, "Well, what is it? What actually is happening?"

It's fascinating because when we ask that question—what is a thought?—we see that it's little more than nothing. It's just like an energy wisp in the mind that comes and goes, so insubstantial. And yet when we're not aware that we're thinking, thoughts have this tremendous power in our lives. They are dictating our lives. They're like little dictators in the mind: do this, do that, go here, go there, get married, get divorced, whatever. Our thoughts are running us, running our lives. They have all this power when we're unaware of what a thought is as a phenomenon.

And yet as soon as we drop in and look to see—okay, what is the nature of thought, not the content, not the story—we see that there's hardly anything there. To see this repeatedly and to understand it repeatedly begins to free us from being so dominated by this particular mental activity. We get much more familiar as different thoughts come, and many are very seductive; they pull us in. But we begin to know in a deeper and deeper way: this thought is completely insubstantial.

My first teacher, Anagarika Munindra-ji, had a wonderful line. He said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother—it's a thought." But we forget this. We have all these thoughts about people and things and events, and we think it's the thing itself or the person itself. Then we get all entangled in whatever our response is to that person or situation, forgetting that the thought of whatever is not the whatever. It's just a thought. And the thought in and of itself is completely insubstantial.

When we carry that awareness, then it becomes possible to really make wise choices. We can discern: Is this thought helpful? Should I act on it? Is it onward leading, or is it not? Is it just causing us trouble? As we investigate this, we really open up a great space of freedom in our minds.

But even this—this knowing that we're knowing, even being aware of the very nature of thought—is not enough. We haven't yet quite come to the fullness of mindfulness. Because we can be observing our experience, present and knowing what's happening, but very often we're experiencing whatever is arising through various filters in

the mind. It might be through the filter of wanting or desire. We're aware of what's there, but there's that greed or wanting in the mind. Or it might be aversion, resistance. Or it might be delusion.

The Buddha gave some very vivid similes for each of these filters. It would be interesting when you hear them to remember them or bring them into your practice, to actually get a sense of how the simile fits your own experience. The Buddha said: there is no fire like lust, no grip like anger, no net like delusion.

It's very interesting when we become aware of these mind states as they come—lust or desire, anger or aversion, the fog of delusion—to really get the felt sense. This is a fire. Anger, with the grip of it on our minds. Or the net of delusion.

A contemporary teaching describes it in slightly different language: greed is pulling in, aversion is pushing away, delusion is running around in circles. I find these similes helpful because they bring to the foreground the effect of these different mind states on our minds and experience. We really start paying attention: What does greed feel like? What's the effect of it in our minds? What's the effect in our minds of anger or delusion? Check this out and explore this for yourselves.

Very often, the filters through which we are observing experience are unconscious and can be so sneaky.

Just as an example, one time when I was practicing in Burma, I'd been there for a couple of months and the practice was going well. My body was very open, with a kind of free flow of energy, and I felt pretty good. But there was this one place in my neck that was like a tight knot, a contraction. I was trying to be mindful of it, and I went in to report to Sayadaw U Pandita. I described the state of openness in my body and said, "But there's this one block."

He got on my case for calling it a block. I hadn't realized that even in that conceptual framework for the experience, there was already aversion and desire. I didn't like this, and I wanted that. I thought I was describing it objectively—oh dear, there's a free flow of energy and there's a block. You see how subtle it can be, that even in the way we sometimes describe things to ourselves, embedded in that can be this pulling in or pushing away. So part of mindfulness is really starting to become aware of these filters.

Mindfulness as a component of the Eightfold Noble Path—called right mindfulness—means the observing power of mind is attentive to what's happening without greed, without aversion, without delusion. You see how mindfulness becomes a very special kind of observing.

There's one really helpful distinction to make where people often confuse things a bit, and that is understanding the difference between recognition and mindfulness. Very often we have the sense that if we recognize what's there, then we're being mindful—that recognition implies mindfulness. But these are two very different qualities of mind. In Buddhist terminology, they're different mental factors.

Another example, a story—and this is one I've told many times over the years, but it illustrates the point so well. The most prevalent afflictive emotion, that's the jargon for unwholesome mind states—for me the most prevalent one over the years in my practice was the mind state of fear. At a certain point in practice it just started coming up so much, and not about anything in particular. There were times when I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It was completely irrational, but it was this kind of primal energy of fear coming up, very strong. I was noting it and I recognized it. I knew it was fear, fear, fear. But this kept coming. It was so deeply conditioned. It kept coming for years in my practice, and I really couldn't understand what kept feeding it.

Until one day I was doing walking meditation and fear was there, coming up. But something shifted in the way I was relating to it. At a certain point the shift was expressed in the thought: if this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay.

"It's okay" became the magic mantra. It's okay. And that was the first moment in all that time that I was really accepting of it. For those years of practice, when fear would come up and I would recognize it and note it, unbeknownst to my mindful mind, I was always observing it wanting it to go away. It's an unpleasant experience. Nobody likes the experience of fear, except maybe those of you who like horror movies.

It was just so interesting that it took that long to come to that place of acceptance, because nobody had pointed out to me this difference between recognition and mindfulness. I thought I had been being mindful, but it wasn't mindfulness—because I was looking through the filter of aversion, of not wanting.

I want to read something from Henry David Thoreau, who was very remarkable. When you hear this, you'll see what a remarkable mind he had. He died quite young—I think he was forty-four—of TB, which is not a pleasant experience. This is a friend of his writing about his friendship with Thoreau and being with him as he was going through this dying process:

"Henry was never affected, never reached by his illness. Very often I heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever." Then this sentence: "He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body."

Pretty remarkable, isn't it? There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, because the mind or awareness has the capacity to just be with what is in a free way.

"During his illness, I never heard the slightest wish expressed to remain with us. His perfect contentment was truly wonderful. Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves."

When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, aunt."

So if we're not quarreling with God, with the Dharma, with awareness, that shows the liberating power of mindfulness. Because mindfulness is just that quality of being with phenomena, whatever it is—pleasant or unpleasant. We can rest in the awareness of it and actually rest in peace.

Of course, this takes practice. This just seems so remarkable to me. It's a remarkable place to land. But that's what we're practicing.

An indication to us that we may be in the space of recognition but not mindfulness is if, as we're going through the day and our various experiences, there's some sense of struggle. Do you know what that's like? Where things are just not flowing easily. We can feel the struggle—it's such an obvious experience. But one of the really powerful things to learn, and we can learn it and practice it being on retreat, is that struggle, the feeling of struggle, is not a problem. It's like a mindfulness bell.

When we're struggling, when we have that feeling of struggle, it's telling us something. It's telling us that something is happening, something is going on that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. So struggle is always just this immediate feedback to us that we've slipped out of that place of mindfulness, which is simply open to what's there without greed, without aversion, without delusion.

So next time struggle happens and you have that feeling, really welcome it. It is a mindfulness bell. It's waking us up to the fact that we're not being mindful, that we're not accepting of what's there.

Just a few examples of how we can apply this for ourselves. Maybe at different times you have the experience of just a lot of thoughts. The mind is on a thinking jag. And we have this whole idea that meditation means not thinking, so somehow we're failing as a

yogi. All kinds of self-judgment and discouragement arise. We might recognize that this is happening—we know that it's happening. But if we're seeing it through the filter of aversion, then there's going to be struggle.

A very simple antidote to that is the simple recognition and noting: lots of thinking. That's what's going on. Why make a problem for yourselves? It's so easeful when we can take the sense of struggle as the feedback, see that it shows us we're not accepting something, and then settle back and open up to the reality of whatever it is that's happening. So this is a new note for you: lots of thinking. Lots of thinking, lots of thinking. And of course, every time you make that note, you're actually being mindful. The lots of thinking in and of itself is not the problem. It's the struggle against it that's the problem.

Another example: one time when I was practicing in Burma, the monastery was incredibly noisy. Just that one year, they were straightening these metal rebars for construction and straightening them by banging, just pounding metal on metal. This was all day long. All these thoughts in my head: "I came to Burma to get enlightened. This is in the monastery!" Of course, my aversion to it didn't make it go away. So I was just in this sense of struggle, not feeling at ease at all.

And then I became aware—oh, this is complaining mind. My mind was just complaining about it to myself. But I hadn't picked that up. I was just lost in the aversion to it. As soon as I recognized, "Oh, complaining mind, complaining, complaining," the whole thing released. It just relaxed. The mind settled back. And it's quite amazing—even with something that on the surface would seem to be this massive distraction, as soon as I could actually become mindful, that is, recognizing it without the filter of aversion, I could just settle down. Complaining mind, hearing. It was no problem at all.

All day long the banging continued—banging, banging—but it was just hearing, hearing. It didn't matter.

There's an important lesson here, a really essential principle that we need to hear again and again because we so often forget it. In this meditation practice, it doesn't matter what the experience is. What matters is how we're relating to experience. That's what we're practicing. We're not practicing to have this or that experience, because whatever arises will be gone anyway. It's all part of a passing show. The liberating practice of mindfulness is not about what experience is happening—it's about how we're relating to that experience.

This is always what we have to check into. But it's so easy to fall into wanting this experience or that experience, and then becoming frustrated when reality doesn't meet our expectations. Yet the depth of practice has nothing to do with what's happening. It

has everything to do with whether we're being mindful of it—aware without the wanting, without the aversion, without the delusion. Can we follow in Thoreau's footsteps, discovering that awareness can hold anything?

This is a critical point to remember, because most of the frustration people feel in practice arises from wanting some particular thing to be happening when it isn't. The resolution is wonderfully simple: be aware of what is happening. It's really very simple. As Munindraji would often say—and he said this a million times—"Be simple and easy. Be simple and easy about things." Whatever is arising, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, it doesn't matter. Can we simply settle back into the awareness of it?

There are a few simple techniques that support this dropping back into awareness rather than remaining caught up in reactivity. One tool, which has already been mentioned, is the method of mental noting—making a soft mental note or label for what's arising. In, out. Rising, falling. Thinking. Lots of thinking. Complaining mind. Hearing. Whatever it is, we just make a very soft mental note.

People have different relationships to this tool. Some find it really helpful and spend the whole day, moment after moment, with this soft, gentle noting, which can greatly support the continuity of practice. Others find it less helpful, perhaps feeling a little burdened by the thought of noting everything all day long. But I would suggest that you all experiment with using it at times, gaining some facility with it as a tool in the toolbox. Then when you're truly caught up in something, you have that tool available—you know what it is and how it works.

Spend some time in sitting, walking, and moving about practicing this. It need not be for an entire sitting or walking period. Perhaps take ten or fifteen minutes where you note fairly continuously. It will become a valuable resource for your practice.

The note is really about recognition. Noting is not yet mindfulness—it's recognizing what's arising. It's like putting a frame around a picture. The point isn't to look at the frame, but the frame focuses our attention so we can see the picture more clearly. That's the function of the note. We recognize, and as Kamala mentioned last night, perception and recognition are the proximate cause for mindfulness. When we frame experience with a note, it directs attention right into the awareness of the experience itself.

But then the question arises: we're recognizing, and the noting is helping us focus, but how do we move from recognition to mindfulness itself? This points to the need to recognize how we're relating. We make the note, but sometimes embedded within it can be desire or aversion.

One way to use the note as a vehicle for entering the arena of mindfulness is to pay close attention to the tone of the note. "Thinking, thinking, thinking"—well, that harshness is a good indication that it's not quite mindfulness yet. We want the thinking to go away. Or "desire, desire, desire" with a grasping quality—that's recognition but not mindfulness, because there's greed, there's wanting.

A very simple technique, when we happen to observe a tone that may not be skillful, is to soften that tone. If we recognize that there's harshness...

in the mental note, we just soften it, and that simple act of just softening the tone, the mental tone in the mind of the note—it's like magic. As soon as we soften the tone, you can feel it settle back into that place of acceptance rather than non-acceptance and struggle.

There's another tool for going from recognition to mindfulness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a Burmese monk who has taught in this country over quite a few years now, has a teaching that has been very helpful. He suggests frequently asking the question: What's the attitude in the mind now? This is like asking, what's the filter in the mind? Just by asking this question with various experiences—whether something in the body, a mental event, or external seeing—it will focus us on whether there actually is a filter or not. Sometimes the simple asking of the question is enough. We don't even need an answer.

As an example of this, one time I was sitting in normal meditation, feeling the breath go in and out. I thought everything was going along fine; there was no sense of struggle. But I remembered this instruction, and so I just asked that question to myself: What's the attitude in the mind? This was with something very simple, like the breath. And it was quite amazing. Just in the asking of the question, in that very moment, I could feel the mind relax back from a wanting that I didn't even know was there.

In reflecting on this, I saw that even when I was just with the breath, in a very subtle way, there was just a slight leaning into it with a wanting for more concentration or a wanting for calm—but very subtle, not obvious at all. Just by asking the question, "What's the attitude?" it settled back, which illuminated that wanting that had not been obvious to me. So that question is very helpful. Periodically, several times or many times in a sitting, in a walking, going about, you might just ask: What's the attitude in the mind?

In this non-interfering, non-judgmental awareness, as it becomes steadier in us, as we're living more in that space of mindfulness—of mindful awareness, not simply recognition—we begin to see and experience the liberating power of this mind state.

I'll give you an example, something I talked about in my groups this morning. One arena of experience that is unfortunately underemphasized in practice is the whole sense sphere of seeing. For most of us who have our eyes in working order, seeing is probably the predominant sense field. We live in the world of what we're seeing, and yet it's very rare that we actually become mindful of the fact that we're seeing. We don't think to note "seeing, seeing, seeing." We're just in it. And being in it, what we're seeing is often the condition for a lot of reactivity.

I saw this super clearly. I was on retreat once at IMS, and I noticed that every time I went into the dining room, my mind had a comment and judgment about almost everyone. It was totally ridiculous. I didn't like what people were wearing, I didn't like how they moved, how much food they took—they took it too slowly, they took it too quickly—just on and on. Totally ridiculous. But I saw this; this is what was going on.

So I just became interested: What is happening here and why? Why is my mind doing this? I realized that all of those thoughts, all of those judgments, all of those comments were arising because I was not being mindful of seeing. They were all prompted by what I was seeing, and I wasn't mindful of it.

So I decided that every time I went into the dining room, that's all I noted. "Seeing, seeing, seeing"—on the line for food, seeing, seeing, taking the food, going to the table, seeing, seeing. It was amazing. Ninety-eight percent of all those judgments and comments were gone, because I was catching it right at the point of contact.

This is just one small example, but it was very powerful for me at the time—an illustration of just how mindfulness, the real quality of mindfulness, can free us from so many of our reactive patterns. We really can settle into a place of much greater ease and move through life with much greater ease.

As we refine our practice of mindfulness, understanding what mindfulness actually is—that it's more than just being in the present, more than simple recognition, more than just an observing power of mind—we discover it's a very special kind of observing power. Without greed, without wanting, without aversion, without delusion, we're just open and aware of whatever it is, pleasant or unpleasant, that's arising.

As we become steadier in this way of being, we see that it is a means for answering one of life's most basic questions: How can I be happy? In one way or another, that's what we're all looking for.

We like to be happy in our lives. John Lennon had something to say about this. He said, "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life." Five years old, and he had some understanding.

Another way of expressing that question might be: What do I learn from being mindful? Once we have an understanding of what mindfulness actually is and what it isn't, and we practice it and become a little steadier in it, then the important question becomes: What am I learning from this? Because mindfulness in itself is not the end. That's not the end point. We're practicing mindfulness in the service of wisdom. So the very relevant question is: Being mindful, what am I actually learning?

One of the first things we learn from being mindful—and this is of such critical importance—is that what we do matters. Actions have consequences, largely determined by the motivation behind the action. The Buddha talked of how actions motivated by greed or hatred or delusion bring the result of some kind of suffering in our lives, while actions motivated by generosity, by love, by wisdom, bring about happiness. But often we go through life doing what we do, acting out our habituated patterns, thinking that whatever we're doing ends just in that experience. It's not that often, I think, that many people really look to see what the consequences of these actions are—that our actions matter, that they bring about different kinds of results.

There's a very powerful teaching of the Buddha in this regard. He said that what we frequently think about or repeatedly practice, either knowingly or unknowingly, becomes the inclination of our minds. It's not just a singular event happening in the moment. Every time we act in a certain way, it reinforces—we might say it strengthens the neural pathway, or deepens the groove, whatever the right terminology is.

When we really understand this, it engenders a tremendous sense of care about what we're actually cultivating. Every time we get caught up in anger, we're strengthening anger. Every time we get caught up in greed, we're strengthening greed. Every time we are filled with love or kindness or compassion, we're strengthening those qualities. It's all part of a stream.

When we really realize this—that what's frequently practiced becomes the inclination of the mind—it deepens the understanding that meditation is not a hobby. It's not just, "Oh yes, this is a nice thing to do." It is, of course, and people could practice it as a hobby and get some benefit. But it has much more profound implications. It really has to do with the transformation of our minds, the transformation of our consciousness in a way that leads to greater peace, to greater happiness.

But we have to be paying attention. It's only through being mindful of what our experience is—what the filters are, what the patterns are in our minds—that we can then, in that place of mindfulness, settle back and discern: Is this skillful? Is it onward leading? Is it not skillful? Is it just leading to more suffering? Mindfulness opens up the place of choice for us, so we're not simply acting out the habituated patterns of our conditioning.

Do you see the liberating potential of this mind state? It opens up our whole lives. It's like we're artists and life is our medium. We're crafting, we're creating a life. How are we doing it? Without mindfulness, we're just swept along in old habit patterns.

Some very simple reflections can reinforce this. Just consider: What is it like, what does it feel like, when we're being generous? Or when we're being self-centered? Just pay attention, be mindful. When I'm being generous, it feels pretty good—there's an openheartedness. What does it feel like when we're being self-centered? You can feel the narrowing and the contraction.

What does it feel like when we're inclusive of everyone around us, or when we're excluding people? What's the difference in our own happiness in these different situations? How do we feel when we see and appreciate the good qualities in people rather than focusing on their faults—which is a very common tendency? It's so easy to see other people's faults. Of course, we don't have any, but it's easy to see them in others.

The whole underpinning of mettā practice emphasizes intentionally focusing on the good qualities in people, and that brings about a very beautiful mind and heart space. These are the kinds of things we can learn from being mindful, and they transform our lives. This practice also leads to more subtle levels of understanding and wisdom about what brings genuine happiness and what doesn't.

What's interesting is that we often confuse these two. We think what actually leads to suffering brings us happiness. That's a problem.

One way of exploring this for yourself—and with everything that's being said from any of us, you don't have to believe any of it. It's all an invitation to inquire and investigate for yourselves. It's simply pointing to possible avenues of investigation.

We might take a look at what it feels like, when we're being mindful, to be holding on and filled with desire versus experiencing a level of renunciation or non-addiction. It's very different. One of the things I really love to do is watch desires arising in the mind. In those times when I'm actually being mindful—just "desire, desire"—I'm feeling it. And then I notice what it feels like when the desire goes away, because it always will. It's just another impermanent state.

Desire comes because of something pleasant. Very few people desire the unpleasant. And so there's always some pleasure interwoven with the desire. But what does it feel like with the desire, and then when the desire goes away? For me, when I see that moment of the desire ending, it's always a sense of being let out of the grip of something. That's why we speak of the grip of desire. In the moment when it disappears, even though it might have been associated with something pleasant, the grip of it is suffering. That can become apparent when we contrast it with that moment the desire disappears. It's like being let out of the grip of that particular mind state.

In a similar way, one of the things we learn from being mindful is the suffering involved in anger. Even though there are aspects of that mind state—and the reason it's so seductive is that people often experience it as energizing and giving us power—we're seduced by it. But the Buddha had some very telling words about this. He said, "Anger, with its poisoned source and honeyed tip." It does have a honeyed tip, a sweet tip, and that's the feeling of self-righteousness or apparent power or strength. That often seduces us, and we don't see underneath to the poisoned source—that it's really a very afflictive mindset, a source of suffering. But we have to see this for ourselves. It's not enough just to hear it and even to know it intellectually. That's where mindfulness is such a powerful tool of liberation—it's the faculty that actually lets us investigate and explore this.

Besides illuminating what's wholesome and leading to happiness and what's unwholesome and leading to suffering, mindfulness also opens the door to the highest peace, to liberation. Through a relaxed but attentive application of mindfulness throughout the day, we begin to see so clearly the changing nature of experience. Our experience is a flow—just one thing after another. Different appearances arising of thoughts and feelings, sensations, sights, sounds. Moment after moment, things are arising and passing away.

Mindfulness helps us be in that flow of experience without obstructing it, without damming it up with our wanting or with our aversion. We begin to understand very deeply—and it's interesting, this is so obvious, and yet not that many people really see it or apply it—that attachment and clinging to that which is impermanent is always a source of suffering. If we're holding on to something, wanting it to stay, but in its very nature it's changing, the more we hold on, the more we suffer. It's so obvious.

But we have to see it, we have to experience it. So pay attention. Really look to see when the mind is attached, and how it is obstructing just the easeful flow of changing experience.

There's a wonderful Native American writer, Louise Erdrich. She wrote, "These powerful moments of true knowledge which we paper over with daily life, but every so often something shatters like ice and we fall into the river of our own existence. We are aware."

And it's like that. It's like we're going along just caught up in everything, and it's like ice. We're not seeing the impermanence, we're not in the flow, we're just reactive to what's pleasant or unpleasant. But every so often there are these powerful moments of true knowledge. Something shatters like ice and we fall into the river, into the flow of our experience. We are aware. It's a state of great freedom and great peace and ease.

Mindfulness as a vehicle for liberation is just a very pithy teaching of the Buddha. It's very simple, very clear, but not so easy to practice—which is why we come on retreat.

The Buddha talked about how in seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. You know, when you're sitting by the side of a river watching it flow, do you try to hold on to the river to stop it? No. The flowing nature of it is so obvious. Our experience is exactly like that. It is a flow of changing phenomena. And when we see that—which is what becomes obvious in our meditation practice, just this flow—when we see impermanence, the mind doesn't cling.

The Buddha went on: when it doesn't cling, it is not agitated. It's important to hear these words and then to check them out in your experience. Knowing it conceptually doesn't do much. But we can pay attention and look to see: when you're really seeing impermanence, just check out—is the mind clinging at that time? And I think you'll see that it's not, but you need to see it for yourselves. And then you can ask the question: when it's not clinging, is the mind agitated or not? It's very interesting to see that when the mind is not clinging, it is not agitated.

And the Buddha goes on to conclude: when not agitated, we personally experience Nibbana, the highest peace, liberation. All of this is what comes from this practice of mindfulness when we understand what mindfulness actually is—and also what it isn't.

I'll close with just two quotes. One is from Thich Nhat Hanh. I really love this. He said, "Happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it." It is available. Suffering and happiness are all created by our own minds. And the practice is just exploring and investigating and understanding how this mind of ours is working. What leads to suffering? What leads to happiness? Then we have the choice. Happiness is available, and we can help ourselves to it.

I'll close now with a poem of sorts by a very accomplished Tibetan Dzogchen master. His name was Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, and I had over the years some opportunities to sit with him in practice. He was quite an extraordinary being. At this particular retreat, there were a lot of people who had been practicing mindfulness. Usually in Dzogchen teaching, mindfulness is not a word that comes up that often—they talk about the Dharma with a different vocabulary. But he knew who was on the retreat, so he wrote this poem for us:

Mindfulness is the root of Dharma.
Mindfulness is the body of practice.
Mindfulness is the fortress of the mind.
Mindfulness is the aid to the wisdom of innate wakefulness.

Lack of mindfulness will allow the negative forces to overcome you. Without mindfulness, you will be swept away by laziness. Lack of mindfulness is the creator of evil deeds. Without mindfulness and presence of mind, nothing can be accomplished. Without mindfulness, you are a heartless zombie, a walking corpse.

So remember that when you're moving about—without mindfulness, you are a heartless zombie.

Dear Dharma friends, please be mindful. By the aspiration of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, may all Dharma friends attain stable mindfulness and ascend the throne of perfect awakening.

That's what we're doing here—ascending the throne of perfect awakening.

So let's sit for just a couple of minutes.

CHAPTER 10

# Equanimity and Compassion in Challenging Times

Joseph Goldstein · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of the most pressing questions for practitioners: how can we remain open and responsive to the many challenges we face—both individually and collectively—without becoming overwhelmed? He identifies two essential qualities of mind: upekkhā (equanimity) and karuṇā (compassion), explaining their intimate and perhaps unexpected connection.*
>
> *Goldstein offers numerous practical approaches for cultivating equanimity, including reframing difficult situations by asking "Why do others feel the way they do?" and "What can I learn from this?" He explores the relationship between thought and emotion, the recognition that much lies outside our control, and the power of expanding our time and space perspectives—beautifully illustrated through Carl Sagan's reflection on Earth as a "pale blue dot." He addresses the subtle defilement of māna (the comparing mind), noting it persists until the final stage of awakening, while encouraging practitioners to greet such patterns with humor rather than aversion.*
>
> *Critically, Goldstein warns against the "near enemies" of these wholesome states: indifference masquerading as equanimity, and overwhelming sorrow disguised as compassion. True equanimity provides the stability to come close to suffering without reactivity, while genuine compassion—as Thich Nhat Hanh said, "a verb"—naturally arises from this willingness to be present with difficulty. Drawing on examples from Malala Yousafzai's courageous activism to simple acts of generosity, he demonstrates that compassionate action has no hierarchy. The talk concludes with a reminder that transformation is gradual, requiring daily practice and great humility.*

The question I'd like to address this evening is how we can stay open and responsive to the many challenges both in our own lives individually and collectively in our society in these rather challenging times—without becoming overwhelmed or drowning in the difficulties that are arising.

As we start paying attention to the situations we face, the difficult situations, again both collectively and individually, two qualities of mind emerge as being particularly effective in working with these difficulties. These are the qualities of equanimity and compassion.

Usually in meditative circles, and probably in the larger world as well, we hear more about compassion than equanimity, because almost all spiritual traditions value compassion and its cultivation. Equanimity is a more subtle and perhaps often invisible quality of mind, an invisible practice in our lives. And yet these two together, equanimity and compassion, in perhaps a not obvious way, are very intimately connected.

So what is equanimity? It's the mind space of impartiality—a non-reactive easefulness of mind that is open to seeing the whole of different situations and experiences. The poet Rilke wrote some beautiful lines about this possibility of seeing things as a whole. He was talking about interpersonal relationships, but it really applies to all of our experience. This is what he wrote:

"Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side by side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky."

I find the image of that so beautiful—that possibility of stepping back and seeing the other as a whole before an immense sky. We might say that equanimity is like that expanse, like that space that holds everything, that holds all the world. It gives us the opportunity to see each other and all situations as a whole before an immense sky, before the immense space of our minds.

Now you're going to have to pay particular attention because the next sentence has a triple negative—this is a trigger warning. This non-reactive spaciousness does not imply non-discernment or a state of vague confusion. Equanimity is a mind state that is open, that is clear, that is bright, and in its non-reactivity, it helps us see things clearly. When we're caught up in reactions to things, we're not seeing things as a whole. We're seeing things through the lens of partiality.

Because equanimity allows us to see, to hold the whole of another person, the whole of a situation, it's the basis then for investigation. Equanimity is the basis for discernment, for wise discernment and skillful responsiveness. It's precisely because we're seeing things clearly and as a whole that we can really assess the situation with tremendous clarity. And it's the understanding—this is a phrase from the Taoist tradition—that non-action is not inaction. Non-action means that we're not reacting to things, but that does not imply inaction. It doesn't imply that we don't respond.

So the question then is how do we cultivate equanimity, both in our meditation practice and in our daily lives, with all the busyness and challenges of them—realizing how quickly, as you undoubtedly have seen, our minds can become reactive, whether to pleasant things or unpleasant things.

There are a variety of practices and reflections which I have found particularly helpful in establishing and coming back to this mind space, this open space of the equanimous mind. One way of exploring this is through different ways of reframing our experience. In difficult situations, whether with a person or a larger situation in our lives, there are a couple of questions which might extricate ourselves from the quagmire of our conditioned and habitual reactions. And it is like a quagmire—we're kind of sunk in these habit patterns.

I'll give you an example of possible reframing. Quite a few years ago, I was at an IMS board meeting, and it was particularly contentious. I even forget now what the issue was, but I do remember the contention. People were really attached to their views, and I was really attached to my view, which was of course the correct one. But at a certain point I was feeling the tension in the room and the tension and suffering in myself. This prompted a kind of interest in my mind: Well, what's going on here? And I simply asked myself the question: Why do the other people feel the way they do?

It had never dawned on me to ask. I just knew their view was incorrect. But when I asked the question—well, there must be a reason they're holding that view—it's like the mind expanded a bit, and I began to see things from their viewpoint. It really eased that sense of polarity, of conflict. And then the following question came: What can I learn from this situation?

It's a very simple reframing of what had been a really difficult experience into a vehicle for opening my mind, for becoming more equanimous, for understanding other points of view—from two simple questions. It's not difficult to do; it's simply difficult to remember to do in the heat of our attachment to our own views.

We can also begin to explore the connection between thought and emotion, which I find so fascinating—to see how a thought arising in the mind can so easily trigger a quick emotion, instantaneously. A certain thought, and there's often some kind of emotion associated with it. It's exploring the relationship between thought and emotion and also the exploration of the very nature of thought itself. What is a thought?

So again, as just an example of all this, later this year I'll be teaching a short retreat at Garrison Institute in New York. Sometime when I was on retreat myself—a self-retreat—they sent an email saying, would you please write six or seven hundred words

describing the retreat? I didn't really want to do it. It felt like just extra work. The course was already full; it's not that they needed to publicize it. But there was an out-of-office response on my email, you know, that messages were not being saved, contact me afterwards.

Sometime later, I got another email from them: please write the six hundred words. So then I was sitting in meditation and I thought of this and I was getting really irritated, annoyed. I was writing this response in my mind, conveying my annoyance. But then, because I was meditating, I also became interested—well, why am I getting caught in this? So I just started looking, looking into my own mind. And I realized that the thought about what they were asking and my response were just thoughts. That's all—they were just empty thoughts. I realized that I could respond very simply: "I'll pass on this one." That's all. I didn't have to write an email telling them what jerks they were. Just, "I'll pass."

As soon as I kind of just settled into seeing this as just a thought—they're just asking for something, I don't want to do it, I don't have to get involved in that annoyed reaction—because who was suffering from that? They weren't. I was the one who was suffering.

So sometimes just this investigation of our own minds when we find ourselves reactive can become an invitation for us to look back inward rather than to keep operating in the blaming mode outside, because the freedom, the liberation is going to come from unhooking our own minds. It's not necessarily going to come from changing the world.

When we're feeling uneasy or reactive in some way, it can also be helpful to experience what the emotion is that's underneath the reaction. A good example of this was Devin's angst about not getting the gold medal. And just so you know, I did give him a gold medal when we went to the teacher room—he got his medal after all. But the mind state underneath, you know, what was feeling the resentment and the annoyance and the irritation of seeing somebody else get the gold medal, was really a very strongly conditioned mind state in all of us, which in Pali is called *mana*. It's usually translated as conceit, but conceit not in the way we use that word in English. Conceit here, or *mana*, means the comparing mind.

Every time we're comparing ourselves with others, it can be that we're comparing ourselves feeling inferior, feeling equal to, feeling superior to the other person. Any comparison at all is the *mana*, the conceit of "I am." I am relative to someone else. I'm better than, I'm worse than, I'm equal to. It doesn't matter, because in each of those cases we're reinforcing that sense of self, that sense of "I."

It's helpful to know that this defilement, this comparing mind—which I'm sure you're all familiar with—is very deeply rooted. In Buddhist psychology it's said that it's not uprooted until the final stage of enlightenment. So even after desire is uprooted, even after aversion is uprooted, which would be huge things, conceit is still there, *mana* is still there. That tendency or habitual pattern of comparing, this sense of "I am," goes very deep. So it's going to come up and be there probably for quite a while.

A transforming attitude with regard to both conceit, *mana*, and all the other defilements is when we go from seeing them arise and then either judging them or judging ourselves for the fact that they're arising, to a certain point in practice where we actually can feel delight in seeing them—because we would rather see them than not see them.

And so now when I see conceit, this *mana*, arise in the mind—it can be about some very little things or sometimes some big things, but any kind of comparing at all—"Oh, *mana*, so glad to see you." But this is with humor, not with aversion. It's the seeing of it that brings the joy, because we're no longer caught up in it, we're no longer identified with it. So it's going to come, but it's our relationship to it, our attitude about it, that either entraps us or liberates us.

Another reflection that helps support greater equanimity is realizing that much of what happens in our lives is outside of our control. Although it's hard to believe, we are not actually the governing center of the universe.

I know, it's a shock. But there are a lot of things outside of our range of influence that we have no control over. Everything is arising out of a very complex multitude of causes and conditions. And sometimes it's an arena in which we can exercise some influence, but many times it's not.

A very simple example: you go to the airport, check in, and the flight is delayed one hour. Then two hours. Have you been in that situation? It's very interesting to watch people's reactions, because there's a whole range. You can see some people taking it very personally, as if the airline is targeting them and delaying the plane. But it's a completely impersonal situation. It's outside of our control. Why get upset? But we do. It's a common response.

Yet that's like holding on to a hot burning coal. We think, "Well, I should be holding on to this because they're doing something to me." But meanwhile, who's burning? We're the ones who are burning. So just to realize in various situations, to investigate and to see: is this something that I actually can influence in some way or not? And if it's beyond our range of influence, can we rest in equanimity? These are the causes and

conditions which gave rise to this. There's some mechanical problem with the airplane—do you really want to get on it? This understanding allows us to settle back into a more equanimous, non-reactive mind. We're more at peace.

This is a simple example, but it's the same understanding that we can apply to more challenging situations—when we begin to understand the causes and conditions behind even bigger things in our lives or in society, and see where we can interact meaningfully and where we cannot, where it's beyond our capacity.

There's a very interesting implication of this realization: the more we let go of the illusion of being in control, the more clearly we see what causes and conditions will give rise to that which fulfills our aims. When we're seeing something clearly, then we can see whether there is something we can do in this situation or not. If we're caught up in our reactivity, thinking that we should be able to control things by our will, we're not going to understand really what will be effective.

Another great support for equanimity is, of course, mindfulness itself—when we become mindful of our reactions, mindful of the ways we're responding to different difficulties.

Here's one example. Quite a few years ago, I was teaching a retreat for law professionals—law students, law faculty, I think maybe even a couple of judges. One second or third year law student said something really interesting. He said the law can often be a litigious process, oppositional. And he said that in the intensity of that process, he needed to get angry in order not to feel fear.

I thought that was really interesting. It points to one of the basic teachings of the Buddha, which is to look at all the strategies we've developed for avoiding unpleasant feelings or emotions or pain. The mind defaults to whatever patterns we've developed. For him, it was defaulting to anger as a way of avoiding fear.

So we had a discussion. I suggested the possibility of learning to accept the feeling of fear—that, as we talked about, it's okay to feel. It's unpleasant, but it's okay to feel it. As we come into acceptance of that, then we don't need the anger to help us avoid it because we're already there. And then we can employ a more useful strategy for the situation. Sometimes it's just that mindfulness of what's underneath which helps us come back to equanimity.

This points to another possibility: once we are actually accepting and mindful of the difficult emotion—in this case fear, but it could be any other—when we're mindful and accepting of it, we realize that it's possible to act even as we're feeling it.

Years ago I was in Hawaii, on the island of Kauai. On the North Shore, there's an eleven-mile hike into Kalalau Valley. It's a remote valley and extraordinarily beautiful, but a very intense hike—up and down and up and down, steep.

So we get to the valley, and I'm with some friends who grew up in Hawaii, and there are big cliffs. This friend who lived there says, "Oh, let's climb the cliffs." I looked up. That was not the first thing that occurred to me. But I was much younger then, and he wanted to climb the cliffs.

There was a lot of fear. I mean, I was really afraid. It was a cliff—handholds and footholds—and I didn't really have a lot of experience with that. But as I say, being young, and he wanted to do it, so I did it. And it was very interesting to see for myself that even though the fear was there the whole time going up—it's not that it went away—but even in the face of fear, I was okay enough with feeling the fear that it didn't have to stop me.

And so that's a big lesson, because when we're accepting of it, then it no longer is a limitation. We say, "Yes, this feeling is here, it's unpleasant, I don't like it, but it's okay." And in the okayness, we can act in whatever way we choose to act. So that was really an important life lesson. Fear and other emotions like that do not have to limit us.

This is a little side point, but it comes out of that Kalalau hike. For eleven miles we were going up with these very expansive views of the coastline and the ocean—it was fantastic. And then down steeply into basically the jungle, the rainforest, where it's all dark and enclosed and you couldn't see anything. And then up. And then down. It's eleven miles of this. It was extremely rigorous for me.

This is an example of our meditation practice. Because people sometimes come to the practice with the idea that it's just going to be a straight line up to bliss and liberation. I'm sure you're disabused of that idea by now. It's up and down and up and down. But just as in the Kalalau hike, the going up and down and up and down was always moving forward. I was getting closer to the goal of the valley, even in the going up and down.

Practice is just like that. There are ups and downs and ups and downs, but if we stay mindful through it, the slope of that curve is going up. Any one experience may be in that open expanse or down in the dark rainforest of our minds, but if we stay mindful, even as we go through the ups and downs, we're proceeding towards the goal of liberation. It's very helpful to remember this so we don't get caught in attachment to the big

expansive view or aversion to the times when it's difficult. Mindfulness is what carries us forward through those ups and downs, and then we're always heading towards liberation.

Equanimity also grows—and there are so many ways of developing this—from an increasing awareness of impermanence. Of course we've talked a lot about this, and we all know intellectually that things change. This is not an esoteric truth. However, we often are not living from this place of understanding. Even though conceptually we know it's true, we're not acting, we're not living our lives as if it's true, because if we were, we would not be clinging at all.

Awareness of impermanence can happen on a lot of different levels, and on each of these levels, it helps bring us back to the equanimous mind. In meditation, sometimes the impermanence can be seen very microscopically. As we get more concentrated, we just see the process of change happening in a microscopic way, moment after moment. This rapid flow of changes is always taking place.

As an example, you hear—what is that? Oh, it's the sound of the bell. As if the sound is one thing. Is it one thing? How many vibrations and overtones and undertones and whatever else is going on? So many changes, microscopic changes happening all the time, and that's true of everything. The breath is not one thing. A step is not one thing. How many different sensations in one in-breath? How many different sensations in the movement of a step? The more we see this impermanence, the more we see this change, it helps us be non-reactive to what's happening because we see it's just continually changing.

For many of the ordinary decisions in our life, awareness of impermanence can help free us from attachment to our preferences. I've found this to be a tremendous source of ease. Just for example, you're going out with some friends. What to do? Where to go? Which restaurant to eat at? I found that remembering that whatever we decide will soon be over—five minutes after it's over, it's gone—makes it easier and more joyful to simply do what makes other people happy. I realize, for me, it's not going to be the source of my everlasting happiness if we go to this place or that place. Just remembering this, it becomes, "Okay, whatever you'd like to do, I'm happy to do." And so it becomes a very joyful way of relating.

I want to share two stories in this regard. The first happened when I was practicing in Bodh Gaya in India. I had been practicing for quite a while by then, and so my practice was in a really nice space—very still and quiet. Munindra, my teacher, had the habit of coming by with every Western traveler who came to Bodh Gaya, people not interested in meditation, just travelers. "Oh, come meet Joseph." So I'm sitting in my room,

really in deep practice and quiet, and this kept happening. He kept doing this. I could hear Munindra's footsteps. This is my teacher. Don't be coming to see me. But he kept coming.

At a certain point, I realized I was getting all upset by this, and the upset was what was disturbing the practice. When I realized that, something shifted. I'd be sitting in stillness and quiet, hear him coming, get up from my seat, interact with this person, be friendly, they'd leave, and I'd go back to sitting. No problem. It was just interesting knowing that this was simply an impermanent situation arising out of my control. Finally realizing that these were just a few momentary little bumps in terms of activity—not a problem at all. We don't have to be disturbed by these kinds of difficulties if we realize it's all part of the passing show.

I'd like to read a few lines from the French essayist Montaigne. He's talking about the nature of a profound friendship he had, and it really has to do with how the friendship was so deep, the love was so deep. This is how he described it. I find it quite remarkable:

"In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me. I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

That's an extraordinary expression of love and equanimity—where we really let go of attachment to our own wants and see that our happiness can truly be in the happiness of others.

This is expressive of a famous line from the Zen tradition, from the third Zen ancestor: "The great way is not difficult for those not attached to their preferences." We all have preferences about things. But are we attached to them or not? If we're not attached, they happen—fine. They don't happen—fine. And it really creates a tremendous spaciousness and ease of mind.

So the last way I'll mention for developing equanimity is expanding our time and space perspectives. And this can happen on different levels.

There's the expansion of historical time. An example which I've used very often over the years—and I could think of others, but I love this one, so my apologies to those who have heard it five hundred times. Some years ago, I read a book about Genghis Khan, and it was extraordinary. I found out things I didn't at all know about. He was a remarkable person, and he ended up conquering most of Asia and some of Europe. His

impact on the world was huge. How many times today did you think of Genghis Khan? I'll bet not once. And we don't even have to go back to Genghis Khan—go back a hundred years. These things which are so intense and so problematic, in the long sweep of history, there's a very different relationship to it all. And we can hold what's happening with greater equanimity.

If historical time doesn't do it, think of geologic time. In four and a half billion years, the sun's going to collapse or explode or whatever it's going to do, and goodbye Earth. From that perspective, your knee pain doesn't mean much. We just give our minds a larger perspective on what's happening.

There's also a cosmic perspective, and this has more to do with space than time. I want to read something which I just find so beautiful. I don't know if you're familiar with Carl Sagan's little writing on the pale blue dot, but this had to do with pictures taken from the Voyager spacecraft four billion miles away from the Earth, taking pictures of the Earth. And all that can be seen in this picture is this tiny, faint, pale blue dot. From that perspective, that's what the Earth is.

This is what Carl Sagan says: "Look again at that dot. That's here, that's home, that's us. On it, everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, economic doctrines, every hunter, forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer. Every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

"The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

"The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment, the Earth is where we make our stand. It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no

better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

It's so beautiful. And if we can enlarge our perspective and not be so caught up in reactivity to the things that are happening moment to moment, just that vastness of perspective inspires us to treat each other more kindly, to take care of the planet. This is a reflection that we can all engender in ourselves. It's not some esoteric, great meditative insight. In fact, you could Google "Carl Sagan pale blue dot" and see the image of it, and it's quite something. It's tiny—you can hardly distinguish it. And this is all we know.

As we develop and practice equanimity in our lives in all of these different ways, we also need to be aware of a hidden danger, because there is one embedded in all of this. That is to be aware of what the Buddha called the near enemies of wholesome states. Each of the wholesome states has a corresponding quality of mind that looks like it, but is not it. The near enemy of equanimity is indifference. The feeling of indifference can look like equanimity, but it is very different. Indifference is a withdrawal from experience.

It's a non-caring attitude. When you're indifferent, you don't care about things, about other people. It's a non-responsiveness to life. This is very different from equanimity, which is an open, clear awareness of all the various causes and conditions that give rise to our current experience. In this clear seeing, we're better able to discern where we can be effective, what wholesome states should be cultivated, what unwholesome states should be let go of, should be abandoned. When there's equanimity rather than indifference, we begin to see where we can engage in a meaningful way.

So the question for us is: how do we mitigate tendencies toward indifference? Because they will come up. Equanimity can sometimes slide into indifference unbeknownst to us, and we end up feeling very detached and disinterested, thinking we're still practicing equanimity. It's really helpful to see this clearly.

It's precisely in this investigation, in seeing what can help prevent us from sliding into indifference, that compassion plays such a critical role. With equanimity, we have enough stability and openness of mind to see the whole of a situation and have the willingness to come close to whatever suffering may exist. Equanimity gives us the foundation, the ability to approach suffering without reactivity. And compassion arises precisely out of this willingness to come close to suffering.

But this is a challenge very often because we don't like to come close to suffering. There's some kind of pain, either in ourselves or in other people, and the tendency is to avoid it. I'm sure you can see this in your own practice. Something painful comes up—is the first response, "Oh good, let me come close to this, let me feel it"? Hopefully you get there pretty quickly, but it's not often the very first response. Difficulty arises, and we want to pull back, which is sliding into indifference. Equanimity is precisely the foundation that gives us the strength, the stability, the evenness, and the willingness. We think, "Okay, my mind's in a pretty open, clear space. I can come close to this. I can feel this." And that's precisely what gives rise to compassion.

It's really important to watch our conditioned reactions. To do this on retreat will help you do it when you're out in the world in your daily lives—to really watch your response to difficult situations, difficult experiences that arise. Do we stay open and investigate? Or do we pull back, withdraw, close off, and contract? I'm sure if you're noticing carefully, you'll see both responses at play. It's very helpful to get clear about this so that we know when we're contracting in the face of some suffering or difficulty and can really feel what that's like. And to see very clearly when our heart and mind are open to difficulty, willing to come close to it, and to know what that experience is like.

Out of this ability to come close, quite naturally we develop a greater empathy for the person, the situation, or ourselves experiencing suffering, because we're willing to be there, willing to stand in its presence. And out of this empathy, two compassion-inducing questions can arise.

The first question is: in the face of suffering, how can I help? That was the title of a book by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, way back in the 1970s. I love that title because it so captures the essence of compassion. We're close to a difficult situation of suffering, and there's enough equanimity allowing us to be close to it. Out of that arises the question: how can I help in this situation? The other question is: what can I do to help alleviate this suffering? These questions prompt the compassionate response.

Thich Nhat Hanh summed this up really well. He said, "Compassion is a verb." Empathy is the feeling of what somebody else is going through—it's attuning to whatever suffering may be there. But compassion implies action. It implies responsiveness. I like this articulation because very often we create some ideal of compassion as a heart-opening feeling that is splendid and vast and magnificent. But very often we may not feel that at all. The responsiveness to suffering isn't necessarily even a feeling, or a particularly strong feeling. We're simply in a situation, and if we're open, if we're close,

there can be a natural responsiveness. If somebody's hungry, you feed them. It doesn't have to rest on having some big emotion about it. It's just the natural response of an open heart.

And that openheartedness is possible when there's equanimity, when there's no reactivity to the suffering. Do you see the connection between these two? Equanimity provides the stability of mind and heart to come close to suffering so that the heart can be naturally responsive.

One way I sometimes express this is that compassion is the natural activity of emptiness. And emptiness in this sense means emptiness of self.

The more we can take the self out of the picture, compassion becomes the natural response to suffering.

Just as equanimity can slide into indifference, compassion has its own near enemy that we really have to be careful of because it's very easy to slip into. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. That's often the response we have to big suffering in ourselves or in the world. But it's helpful to distinguish between the sorrow and sadness that can open the heart to the suffering that's there, and the overwhelming sorrow that simply leads to despair. In the face of big suffering, if we slide into the near enemy of sorrow and it becomes overwhelming, we become despairing about the situation. That doesn't help anyone. It's not a skillful state; it's not a wholesome state of mind. But sometimes we experience it masquerading as compassion. As we're feeling this, we may think we're being so compassionate, but actually we're being overwhelmed. So this distinction is really very helpful.

Especially with people engaged on the front lines of social action who are dealing right at the edge of great challenges and great suffering in society, one of the ongoing problems is burnout. I've taught retreats for social activists and environmental activists, and one of the most common comments was about exactly this. People are engaged, their motivation is good, and their heart is in the right place, but they get burned out. Why? Because the compassion has slipped into overwhelm, then despair, and then it's not helpful.

This is very interesting. Compassion is extremely interesting because even though it comes from drawing close to suffering, the feeling of "how can I help" is uplifting. It's not a despairing mind state at all. It's an energizing and uplifting feeling. So it's really important to track our own responses and to watch the danger of equanimity sliding

into indifference. We want to watch compassion and the danger of compassion sliding into overwhelming sorrow. That becomes the signal that we've moved out of that ennobling quality of compassion.

Compassion can manifest in many different ways. There's not just one route for compassion in action. It can manifest as generosity—just taking opportunities to be generous. When a thought of giving something arises, this is a practice I've really undertaken for years now, and I love doing it. The thought to give something arises, and my practice is to do it, instead of second-guessing. "Oh, that would be too much, I may need it"—or whatever the rationale is for pulling back. If the thought comes, do it.

And it's really interesting what I've seen. Sometimes the thought is just a little thing. It could be a phone call or helping in some small way. Sometimes it's been big things. I see this thought come up in my mind—whoa, this is big. Do I really want to do this? But because I've taken it on as practice, I do it. And I've never regretted it. It's always been a source of happiness. So that's one way of expressing the compassion that comes quite spontaneously in these thoughts.

Sometimes compassion really manifests with tremendous courage and determination. Some of you may know—probably most of you know—of the young Pakistani activist Malala. An incredible story. She was a Pakistani activist for female education, and in 2012, when she was fifteen years old, some Taliban terrorists, because they're very opposed to female education, tried to assassinate her and shot her. It was actually very serious. She was in a coma for eight days, unconscious. Then she recovered enough to go to the UK for treatment, and she recovered mostly. This became a worldwide phenomenon. She created the Malala Foundation, really supporting education—education for all. That was the mission.

This is one of the things she wrote, as a demonstration of tremendous courage and determination, because she was the recipient of continual threats to her life as she was engaged in this work:

"The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambition, but nothing changed in my life except this: Weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power, and courage were born. I am not against anyone. I'm here to speak up for the right of education for every child. I want education for the sons and daughters of the Taliban and all terrorists and extremists."

And since then, she's done all this incredible work. In 2014, at age seventeen, she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. This is a seventeen-year-old girl who transformed that intense situation of suffering and violence into a worldwide movement helping young children get an education. It's quite remarkable.

We can see that compassion takes many forms—sometimes it's small things, sometimes it's really big things. And it's important to realize that there is no hierarchy of compassionate action. The field of compassion is limitless because it is the field of suffering beings. There's no one way. We will all find our own way to be of help. How can I help? It depends on our interests, our inclinations, our talents, our abilities. Sometimes it is being on the front line of social action. And sometimes it could be sitting in a cave for your entire life with the aspiration to help awaken all beings. I think of the Buddha before his enlightenment, his many lifetimes as a bodhisattva sitting in a cave. But we're sitting here as the result of all that work. So it's really important to understand and not create a hierarchy of compassionate action. We'll all find our own way and contribute in whatever way we can.

As we learn to navigate the challenges in these times—the challenges of our lives and all the suffering that's there in so many domains and arenas—it's very helpful to really deepen our exploration of the meaning and experience of equanimity and compassion. We also need to recognize their near enemies so we don't unknowingly fall into them. And we can see how compassion and equanimity mutually support each other. They're inextricably connected.

We need great humility on this path. The Dalai Lama wrote, "Changes in attitudes never come easily. It's a wide round curve that can be negotiated only slowly, not a sharp corner that can be turned all at once. It comes with daily practice." We realize that as we understand, at whatever level we do, the value of these two qualities of mind, we must have humility in our practice of them—recognizing that it's a gradual process of developing these qualities in ourselves.

This is expressed in a short haiku by Issa: "New Year's Day, everything's in blossom, I feel about average."

I love that. Because "average" reminds us that at some basic level all of us are average. We're just people going about our lives. But it's understanding that the potential for growing equanimity and compassion and wisdom—that potential exists in all of us. And that becomes the basis, the foundation of our aspiration and our practice.

CHAPTER 11

# Day 8 Morning Sit (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · 1h21

> *In this Day 8 morning session, Joseph Goldstein offers a profound teaching on the nature of time before opening to an extended Q&A with retreatants. He illuminates how we construct concepts of past and future from certain classes of thoughts—memories, planning, anticipation—and then project these constructs as if they exist independently behind or ahead of us. Recognizing that past and future are only experienced as thoughts arising in the present moment can be tremendously liberating, freeing us from carrying these conceptual mountains on our shoulders.*
>
> *The Q&A session addresses several practical meditation concerns. Goldstein explains the signs of being "too loose" in practice—the state of being "more or less mindful" where we're somewhat present but lost in background mental activity. He recommends dropping into the sensation level of experience, whether feeling the pressure and lightness in walking meditation or the vibrations and temperature of the breath. This embodied attention helps consolidate genuine mindfulness versus surface-level awareness.*
>
> *Other topics include working with difficult mind states like fear and aversion (using the "inner Dharma coach" technique), the quality of ardency (atāpī) mentioned in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as wise passion for the Dhamma, working with breath when one has a tendency to control it, and cultivating equanimity with pleasant sensations without suppressing their pleasurable quality. Throughout, Goldstein emphasizes that practice involves allowing different factors of mind—mindfulness, wisdom, intention—to fulfill their natural functions without requiring a self who directs them.*

This morning we'll just have a quiet sit. You've heard quite a bit of instructions by now, so it's time to apply them in the great awakening.

Before opening to questions, I'd like to give a short teaching on the nature of time. Now that we're in the glide path towards the ending of the retreat, it's not uncommon for a lot of planning thoughts to be arising in the mind—thinking about what you're going to do after the retreat, who you're going to meet, what you're going to say. This is a very good opportunity to investigate just how it is that we create the notion of past and future, and then how we live much of our lives in the story of that construct.

How do we actually experience the past? We're sitting or walking and we have certain kinds of thoughts—planning, anticipating, imagining. We see those thoughts, and unconsciously, through our education and conditioning, we create a concept called "past" to describe those kinds of thoughts. We have certain memories, and out of those memories we create the concept. And then—this is what's really interesting—through some quite bizarre mental gymnastics, we've created this concept in our mind called "past" and then somehow throw it back behind us, as if the past is actually back there as some kind of reality. But how are we actually experiencing it? We're experiencing it as a thought in the moment. That's really what's happening: a certain kind of thought. But we get lost in the concept that we've created to describe that class of thoughts.

The same thing happens with the future. We're just sitting, minding our own business, and these thoughts of planning and anticipation arise in the mind. We create the concept "future," and then again, kind of throw it out ahead of us, as if the future is really out there waiting for us to catch up. But the only way we are actually experiencing it is as a thought in the moment.

Why is this important? For me, it was tremendously liberating to see this very clearly, because for the most part in our lives, we are living burdened by these concepts of past and future. It's like we're carrying these mountains on our shoulders. It would be very interesting for you to observe just how much of the time the mind is lost in the idea of past, in the idea of future—with regret or nostalgia or anticipation. All kinds of emotions and feelings and mind states arise because we're carrying these concepts and imbuing them with a certain reality.

The difference between going through life carrying this burden of past and future and seeing that these are just thoughts in the moment is profound. Thoughts in the moment, as I hope you've seen by now, are incredibly light. There's not much to them. And yet we live our lives burdened by these concepts of time.

Now, this is not a discussion of some scientific or metaphysical nature of time—that's something else entirely. This is about how we experience it for ourselves. And the experience of it is only as a thought in the moment.

I would suggest undertaking an investigation of this. Toward this part of the retreat, particularly with future thoughts, they're going to be coming. It's really a chance for you to see very directly and very clearly that this whole future story which you may have created and then inhabit is nothing more than a thought in the moment.

This does not imply that we don't take appropriate action or make decisions with regard to these thoughts. Sometimes we plan, and it's actually about doing something and accomplishing something. We can still respond to these thoughts, but it's a very different response if we're seeing, "Yes, this is a thought in the moment. Do I need to act on this or not?" Most of the time we're just lost in reverie and no action is required. To see it just as a thought really frees us from the grip of these concepts.

Even when it's appropriate to plan, we can do that while seeing that we're responding to a thought in the moment, that it's actually happening right now, rather than being lost in some imagined future scenario. It's a very different mind state and a very different quality of freedom as we negotiate these thoughts and ideas.

When I saw this, it was totally transforming—understanding that basically the past and future are in the present. They're not out there, in terms of how we're experiencing them.

That's been extremely helpful, even though I knew that. Hearing it from people with cred really helped. But I think what would be even more helpful would be to know what to look out for in terms of too loose. What does that look like? What does that feel like?

Okay, too loose. There's a description of the mind state of too loose and then the manifestation of too loose.

The mind state of too loose is what I call "more or less mindful." We're going along and we're kind of there, but not really there. There's a lot of background or even foreground mental activity even as we are somewhat connected to what's happening. The manifestation of it is when you find that you're drifting off quite a lot into reverie, into thought, where you're not being mindful of the thinking and you're not really fully mindful of whatever the activity is—whether in sitting with the body or the breath, or in walking.

I would really watch out for this more-or-less mindfulness. It's really apparent and obvious in the walking. Sometimes we're walking and we're kind of there, but meanwhile there's a whole story going on in our minds.

One way of bringing the attention back in a fully mindful way, as opposed to more or less mindful—for example in the walking—is to see the difference between being mindful of the movement, which is being mindful, you're there, but it's more on the surface experience of it. You take a step and you're aware of the movement. The difference between that and taking the step and *feeling* the sensations involved in the movement—the pressure, the heaviness, the lightness.

When we were reporting to Sayadaw U Pandita, it was a very rigorous reporting form. We would have to go in and say, for example in the walking, "There was the lifting, I noted the lifting, this is what I experienced in the lifting—lightness, pressure, vibration. In the moving forward, noted it, this is what I felt." It was surprisingly demanding to actually be that connected to the feeling of what we were experiencing and to be able to name it. It required being really present, really attentive. Otherwise, we would know we were moving but would not know really the sensations in the movement.

So that's a way when you feel like you're in this more-or-less mindful state, the too-loose state—coming back, dropping back in to the sensation level—is very gathering of the attention.

At first, while we're still in this container of the silence of the retreat, you might devote some time in the walking just to investigate this level. In the beginning of the investigation, going slowly is really helpful because—okay, what is this? What am I actually feeling here?

But once you practice that a bit and you become familiar with the sensations being felt, then the mind can quite easily drop into that place at any speed, on retreat, off retreat. It's like we've just trained ourselves to be embodied in that full way. And then that becomes a tremendous aid to integrating mindfulness into our lives. Every time we take a step or are walking down the street or in our home, the mind—because of the training, because of the practice—automatically drops into that embodiment.

---

*My voice feels shaky. I'm not used to speaking. So my question sort of relates to that and has two parts. The first is around effort. From my experience so far, it's not like I choose where my awareness lands. So when you talk about coming back to the breath, I'm not sure who the person is who is coming back to the breath. It's like awareness is sometimes on the breath and sometimes I suddenly realize I'm thinking, but I don't know where the volition is there—who's making that decision. It just sort of happens. So I don't know what the instruction is. What am I supposed to be doing?*

I get the question. Who's doing anything?

*That's my question. It's almost like I'm either going to be on the breath or not, but I don't know where the "me" is that's supposed to be doing anything.*

Right. So, one: just forget the notion that there's a me there in the first place to do anything—which could be a whole five-hour dharma talk. But rather see that it's a process of different qualities of mind.

For example, out of just being mindful of what's arising in the moment—so there's no you choosing, mindfulness is arising because it's been cultivated—and then out of the mindfulness of what's happening in the moment, there may be the wisdom factor of mind, which sees clearly: "Oh, present. Not so present." The wisdom factor of mind could then condition the volition. When wisdom is seeing that the mind is wandering, the wisdom can be the conditioning factor for intention: "Oh, be good to come back to the breath."

So there's no "I" necessarily in any of that. It's just the different factors of mind fulfilling their own function.

*And if I could just ask one other thing related to that: I still get plagued, after practicing for some years now, by really gripping, intense mind states largely around fear and obsession. When I'm doing the practice, I can get to this place now where I can see aversion is present—largely, I'm scared of this feeling—but it's like I've forgotten what to do from there. When we see aversion or clinging, what's the instruction? Then what? I see it, but now what?*

So two things come to mind. One is that the instruction is always very simple: be mindful of what's arising and don't cling. When you see the aversion, the resistance, then that becomes the object of mindfulness. It's almost as if the mind is saying, "Aversion feels like this." You're bringing a little bit of investigation to the experience of aversion, because that's what's arising in the moment.

But as you're doing that, with mindfulness and investigation, even using noting as a supporting tool—"aversion, aversion, aversion feels like this"—in all of those moments, there is no identification with the aversion. You're not strengthening the sense of self, thinking "I'm feeling really angry," because you're taking it as an object of mindfulness. You're taking that mind state as an object of awareness.

So basically, with anything that's arising, whether it's the initial object of contact with something or the reaction in the mind to that—there's pain, you feel the pain, then there's aversion to the pain—then you become mindful of the aversion. It's really the same practice. It's just staying present with what's arising in the mind and body in the unfolding sequence.

One way of doing this, or reminding yourself to do this, is to develop what I call the inner Dharma coach. We're actually coaching ourselves. For example, with fear—and I mentioned that I worked with that a lot earlier in my practice—I would coach myself when it came up really strong: "Okay, it's okay. Just be with it. Relax into it. Can I feel it?

It's okay." It's just a reminder of the right attitude that we can bring to it. You can find your inner coach for whatever particular experiences you find difficult or problematic and bring up the coach of how to be with it.

---

A woman in the audience asked about noticing when the mind is too loose, when she's aware that she's also thinking at the same time. How do we work with that mind state?

Well, that's really what I've been talking about in terms of recognizing this quality of more or less mindful. Then it's just about directing attention—seeing that, which is good. You've become mindful. "Oh, it's like this now." You recognize it. Then seeing that the more fully you can experience the body on the sensation level, that helps to really settle the mind in a deeper way.

For example, in the walking, as I described, dropping into the sensations of the movement. In the sitting, if you're working either with the whole body or the breathing, it's easier to be with the breath on different levels. It can be that more or less mindful level where we know we're breathing in, breathing out, and it's a little bit mechanical, even though there's some connection there. But that's very different than dropping into the breath.

And this is the art of the practice—still letting it be natural. There's often a tendency as we drop in to feel it more closely that we get involved in some manipulation of the breath. Just be watchful of that, and if it happens, notice it and remind yourself, "Okay, just sit with the whole body, let the breath find its own natural rhythm." And then, what are the actual sensations being felt? Whether it's the rising and falling or the in and out—the vibration, the softness, maybe the coolness or warmth as the breath comes in and leaves. It's that dropping into the sensation level which can help consolidate the mindfulness in the experience.

---

Someone asked about the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and its instructions around ardency—whether it relates to wise effort or the attitude of mind, and what the Buddha's definition might be versus what they called "the Hollywood version."

Well, they may not be so different. Different in the expression of them, but as a kind of mind-heart quality, I just see it as a wise passion for the Dharma. It's that enlivening quality, so that we're not just in this more or less mindful state or going through the motions somewhat mechanically, as the mind can drop to that level very often.

Ardency is really related to what Kamala talked about—saṃvega, that sense of spiritual urgency, the recognition of the depth and profundity of Dharma practice as being a path to real transformation of our consciousness. It's a path to liberation, so it's not a superficial undertaking. Sometimes it's just that contemplation or reflection upon the scope, the depth, and the vastness of Dharma practice.

Over the years, over these many years of practice and going through all the ups and downs that you go through in your own practice, what's sustained my practice is this interest in the nature of the mind, the nature of consciousness, the nature of our lives—how suffering is created, how we create suffering for ourselves, and how we can be free.

So all of that creates that feeling of ardency, of aliveness, of passion. The quality of the effort is very often conditioned by the attitude of mind. When we arouse this ardency or saṃvega, then that will be a support for finding the right balance of right effort. When we find that we're too loose, that ardency inspires us to adjust.

There's a Dharma equivalent to Carl Sagan's blue dot. From the astronomical point of view, just the mystery of this universe—I'm thinking of the Voyager spacecraft, eleven billion miles away, sending pictures back of Earth. It expands our sense of wonder and awe. We can also contemplate the vastness of the Dharma and the mystery of consciousness and awareness. It creates that same sense of awe at this whole process, and the blessing of finding some methodology for exploring it. Really, mindfulness is that methodology. This is the way of exploring every aspect of our mind and heart and body and experience. Sometimes just reflecting on that I find tremendously inspiring.

A practitioner raised a question about working with the breath as an object of attention, particularly as a singer who has a very instinctive physical response to control the breath rather than allowing its natural flow.

There are a couple of things to consider here. First, it is possible to become mindful of the controlled breath. You're attending to the breath and then you see that you're controlling it in some way. One thing to experiment with is simply becoming mindful that that's what's happening, rather than becoming aware of it and immediately going to the thought that it shouldn't be controlled. It would be interesting to see if by simply accepting the breath as it's manifesting in this controlled way—just noting "it's like this now, it's like this now"—whether with that attitude, it actually finds its natural rhythm.

You can also go to the whole body. That's why I like that frame: "There is a body." Because when the mind is not zeroing in on the breath but giving it a bigger frame, you're still breathing, hopefully, but there's a greater opportunity for the breath to find its nat-

ural rhythm. You're not attending to it in a narrowly focused way, but you're still aware of it within the context of the bigger frame. The mind is grounded in the bigger frame, and breathing is just one of the things happening within it.

I don't know how radios work, but going back to whenever you did dial on a radio, you turn the dial and it's static, static, static, and then it's receiving the signal in a clear way. There's that sense of receiving rather than going to. If you're grounded in the larger context—"there is a body"—that's your anchor. Within that, you're just receiving the input of the body breathing, but you're not going out to it. You're settled back, and the breath is simply an element arising within the bigger context that you're attuned to. In that way, it mitigates the tendency to control, because you're grounded in a bigger frame.

Another practitioner observed that they find it relatively straightforward to be equanimous with negative sensations, but with pleasurable sensations it's more difficult. The inclination is to lean into them and enjoy them. They don't feel like they're holding on or trying to prolong pleasurable experiences, but when they try to be equanimous during intensely pleasurable sensations, those sensations lose their pleasurable quality—in the same way that sitting with knee pain until it ceases to be painful. They weren't sure what the right approach was.

Well, that sounds like there's a little clinging in there.

But there's nothing wrong with experiencing pleasant sensations—part of that might be the enjoyment, the experience of the pleasure, of the pleasantness itself. Equanimity doesn't imply that you no longer experience the pleasantness of a pleasant feeling. The pleasant feeling is what's arising, and it has the characteristic of being pleasurable. One can be mindful of that and be fully experiencing it.

It's that last point you mentioned—can you sit back and just be in the full experience of it for as long as it lasts, but without that added impulse not to let go of it, without wanting it to continue? That's where the equanimity is. It's the spaciousness of mind where we're fully with whatever's arising, whether it's unpleasant or pleasant. But we're practicing not adding to the fullness of that experience the pushing away if it's unpleasant, or the wanting it to continue if it's pleasant.

So I would just be open to the experience of the pleasurable nature of it, but watch for the grabbing onto it or wanting it to continue. And if that's there, then that becomes the next object—the clinging, the wanting.

Just to remind you: see if you can keep in mind that little investigation of past and future, and how they're just thoughts in the moment. Because if you really see that clearly, it's liberating. It has a tremendous effect.

CHAPTER 12

# The Map of Wisdom, Part One

Joseph Goldstein · 1h05

> *In this profound opening talk of a two-part series, Joseph Goldstein presents what he calls "The Map of Wisdom"—an integrated framework showing how the Buddha's core teachings interconnect and lead to awakening. Beginning with Suzuki Roshi's distillation of Buddhism into two words—"everything changes"—Joseph explores the far-reaching implications of anicca (impermanence) for meditation practice and daily life.*
>
> *The talk illuminates how direct perception of change differs from conceptual understanding. Using the Pāli phrase "becoming otherwise," Joseph demonstrates how dropping from the conceptual level (thinking "hand") to direct experience (feeling pressure, warmth, tingling) reveals the continuous flow of arising and passing that characterizes all phenomena. He references the teachings of Ledi Sayādaw, who emphasized that seeing impermanence is "the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening."*
>
> *Joseph connects this understanding to the Four Noble Truths, showing how seeing impermanence reveals dukkha—the inherently unsatisfying nature of conditioned experience—and how this insight naturally leads to the release of craving. He shares a personal meditation experience where the phrase "whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away" arose, followed by the liberating recognition: "therefore, there's nothing to want." This understanding of non-craving as the heart of practice is presented as essential—the whole point is not about achieving special experiences but about freeing the mind from attachment. The talk concludes by introducing the concept of emptiness and the two truths (relative and ultimate), setting the stage for part two's exploration of selflessness and the complete map of wisdom.*

Some time ago, I was reflecting on some of the core aspects of the Buddhist teachings. Then in one sitting, somehow they just arranged themselves in a certain order. I was quite surprised by it—everything just fell into place in a certain way. I called this arrangement of teachings "the map of wisdom" because it brings together a variety of teachings, but as is remarkable about all the teachings of the Buddha, they mesh and fit together so beautifully as they express different aspects of the Dharma.

So this evening I'd like to talk about this map and how different essential teachings relate to each other. Some of these teachings will be obvious and just part of our everyday lived experience. And some will reflect more subtle aspects of the Dharma. This map of wisdom is going to unfold over two talks, so I'll go this evening and get as far as I can, then pick it up on Thursday and hopefully bring it to completion.

We'll begin with perhaps the most fundamental, foundational understanding of the Dharma—the foundational understanding of the whole journey. It was encapsulated in a short little dialogue that Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, had with one of his students. This is what his student said to him: "I've been listening to your lectures for years, but I still don't understand. Could you please put them in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?"

Suzuki replied, "Everything changes."

The implications of this very simple statement are enormous. In some way we can understand the whole of the Dharma as just an elaboration of this one teaching: everything changes.

Before exploring some of the profound implications of that statement, I'd like to talk a little about some of the ways that we experience change and impermanence in our lives. It can come from very obvious observations that are just part of our ordinary lives. These are experiences that we all have, but sometimes—and perhaps even often—we just don't pay attention to them in a deep way. We overlook them.

Just a few examples, and as I say, a lot of this is extremely obvious, revealing the truth of change. We see it very obviously in changes of nature: changes of weather, changes of season, and of course the rather catastrophic changes of our climate.

We see this truth of change in a particularly unique way in New England. Those of you who have been there, either at IMS or other areas of New England—it's quite remarkable that there are miles and miles of old stone walls through the woods. You walk through the forest and right in the middle of the forest there are these stone walls, and then stone foundations of old abandoned houses. It's not hard to imagine the people who lived there, who built those walls and lived in those houses and had life experiences as vivid as our own. But walking through the woods now and seeing the remnants—where are they now? Where's all the activity of their lives now? Nothing remains. It's like a dream.

There are changes in society, the rise and fall of whole civilizations. Just recently I was listening to one of those Great Courses on Audible, and this particular course was fascinating to me. It was about the rise and fall of empires before Alexander the Great

—3,000 years of history before Alexander. The whole course highlighted the rise of these empires: the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Hittites, Egypt, on and on. It was so interesting and so resonant in a way with what I sometimes feel is happening now with our own empire. These civilizations came into being, they flourished, they became powerful, they engaged in all kinds of activities—often with a lot of conflict and warfare—and then conditions changed and they disintegrated and disappeared and a new empire arose. This has been going on forever. It's the history of the human race.

There are changes in the experiences of our relationships, our work situations, changes in our bodies, changes in our minds. When we pay attention in any of these realms, from the very individual to the global, we see it's completely obvious that everything changes.

I want to mention a phrase which highlights this, one I came across as I was listening to the suttas, the Buddhist discourses.

They're all available on Audible now. We can listen to them as well as read them. And what I found is that often in listening, we take things in differently—at least I do—than when I'm reading.

So I was listening to this discourse, and there was one line which I must have read many, many times, but never with much impact. When I heard it, it really struck me. Something became so vivid when I heard this phrase, I think partly because it's a little unusual in English. It's not how we would usually phrase things.

It's very simple. The discourse was talking about how everything changes—*becoming otherwise*.

That was the phrase: becoming otherwise. Everything, all the time, in every moment, is becoming otherwise. For me, that phrase highlighted and made so vivid the essential instability of everything. Because everything is always becoming otherwise.

I really started applying it. I was on retreat as I was listening to these suttas, so I just started using the phrase in my own experience. I was doing walking meditation, and at a certain moment my knees started to hurt. Oh, becoming otherwise. Something broke in my house. Oh, becoming otherwise. It just highlights the fact that we cannot—it's impossible—to count on things staying the same, staying the way we want them to stay, because everything is always becoming otherwise.

That's just another way of tuning in to this statement of Suzuki Roshi, which has such profound implications. We see it in science—the birth and death of stars and galaxies, and then the inconceivably rapid movement of subatomic particles. I was

reading somewhere that some of these subatomic particles, their movement is measured in trillionths of a trillionth of a second. We can't even comprehend how quickly things are moving and changing on the most fundamental level of this physical material world. And we think things are so solid and stable and fixed, but they're not.

Obviously our ordinary perception is probably not picking things up on the level of trillionths of a trillionth of a second. But what we do find in our practice, through the gradual cultivation and strengthening of mindfulness and concentration, is that what seems so solid and fixed and singular is really changing and moving all the time. What we think is a solid, singular experience is not just one thing—it's made up of a flow of many changes.

We can see this very simply, even within a breath or a step. Conventionally, we might say, "Yes, there's a breath," as if the breath is a single thing, or "a step." But as we're paying attention, we see that within a breath there are innumerable sensations, vibrations, fluctuations in temperature. Or in a step, the many sensations of movement. Or we hear the sound of a bell. It's not one thing. When we're really listening to the sound, there are so many different vibrations and changes of pitch.

I'd like to do a little experiment with all of you which will illustrate an important point, revealing the importance of seeing things in this way. Just notice how your hands are resting right now. They're probably touching something—either resting on one another or on your lap or your legs. Now, pretend you've never meditated before. I'm asking the non-meditator you: what are you experiencing?

The non-meditating you would probably answer, "I feel my hands resting together." That would be the conventional, ordinary answer. But we don't feel our hands resting together. There is no sensation called "hand." We don't feel hand. We feel certain sensations, and then we overlay a concept on those sensations. We create the concept, which is a kind of thought, and we call it "hand" or "hands." And because we have not yet begun our meditation career, we think that's what we're feeling—that there's something called a hand that we're feeling—not realizing that it's a concept.

Now, you might well be wondering, so what? What's important about all this?

Well, it's of tremendous significance in terms of this meditative journey. For the simple reason that the concept doesn't change. Hand today, hand yesterday, hand tomorrow. So as long as we're perceiving or being with our experience in terms of the concepts we have about them, we are not tuning in to the experience of the momentary flow of changes that is always going on.

And so we begin to get a very fixed notion of reality—that there are these solid things, more or less unchanging, even though over time we might acknowledge that the hands grow old. But as long as we're at the conceptual level, we are not deepening our understanding. We're not refining our perception of change.

It's very interesting to notice in our lives that we are mostly living in the world of concept. And that's why a meditation retreat, where we drop down from that level to the level of direct experience, is so valuable. So now, if you really feel your hands resting on one another, be your meditative self. What am I feeling? Pressure, warmth, tingling, whatever. Those are the actual sensations being felt, and they are in continuous change. It's by dropping into this level that we really begin to refine our understanding of this fundamental insight into the changing nature of everything.

This is a big step in our meditative journey—when we go from a simple awareness of what is happening to an awareness of the changing process of what's happening. It's almost as if we go from the content level to the process level, of things continually becoming otherwise. And we need to see this again and again, more and more deeply.

There was a very famous Burmese monk who lived around the end of the 1800s, beginning of the 1900s. His name was Ledi Sayadaw. He was a great scholar and a very realized being. This is what he said: "Not seeing arising and passing away of phenomena is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening."

I hope you see how this really highlights the importance of this shift—dropping in or dropping down from the level of our concepts about things to the direct experience of seeing the continual arising and passing of things becoming otherwise all the time. That's the doorway to all the stages of insight and to all the different levels of awakening.

So how does this happen? How does seeing impermanence lead to these insights? What are the insights that actually come from seeing things change, from seeing directly and with refinement the nature of change?

Well, one of the insights that itself has tremendous implications for how we live is this: through seeing change, things always becoming otherwise, we begin to experience very directly the basic, ultimately unsatisfying, unfulfilling nature of conditioned experience. Conditioned experience means everything that arises because of conditions—and it changes.

To say that we begin to get insight into the ultimately unsatisfying or unfulfilling nature of our conditioned existence does not mean that we don't experience all kinds of happiness and pleasures, which we do. That's part of our lives. Rather, it's the understanding that no matter how pleasant something is, or how much happiness or joy we experience in the moment from it, conditioned experience can never provide a lasting happiness precisely because it doesn't last.

And it just seems so obvious. How many beautiful or wonderful experiences have you had in your lives? Countless. We're fortunate, mostly. We have so many beautiful experiences. But where are they now?

What's so amazing about the seductive power of the world—and I find this so striking—is that when we look back at our lives, the ephemeral nature of all that we've experienced, the dreamlike nature of it all, seems so clear. We look back at all the things that have happened and it's like remembering a dream. And yet when we look ahead, we keep getting enticed by all the experiences to come, forgetting that they will also soon be past. When we look back, we understand it very clearly.

And as soon as we look ahead, we completely forget it. This is so much a part of our lives—looking forward, leaning forward, anticipating the next hit of experience. It could be the next event in our lives, the next day of work, the next project, the next vacation. Here it might be the next meal, or the next breath. We're always leaning into the next as if the next whatever will finally fulfill us. But of course, because of this great truth of change, of things becoming otherwise, it's incapable of providing that lasting fulfillment because it soon passes into the dreamlike state of the past.

And as many of you will know, although not all of you, the older we get, it all seems to be flying by ever more quickly. Somebody once made the comment—I read this someplace—that when you turn fifty-five or sixty or sixty-five, breakfast seems to come every fifteen minutes. It is really like that. The sense of time as we get older really speeds up.

When we truly and deeply see the truth of change—and this is what our practice is, this is really what we are learning from being mindful of the various aspects of our experience—it's not only what it is that's happening, but by repeated mindfulness of it all, we see directly. It's not some theory, and it's not what somebody is just saying. We see for ourselves the continually changing nature of everything. And in seeing that, we deepen our understanding that attachment to what in its nature changes is the cause of suffering.

One meditator came into an interview and was describing this experience. He said, "Just this understanding is like rope burn." You know what rope burn is? If you're trying to hold onto a rope and it's being pulled through your hand, the tighter you hold on, you're going to get rope burn. We're living in a state of rope burn to the degree that we're attached—really to anything. Because everything is in a state of change. Everything is impermanent. This is one of the key understandings of the Buddha's teaching: that attachment or clinging to that which is impermanent is a fundamental cause of suffering in our lives.

It's not hard, I think, to understand this intellectually. But our practice is to make it vivid in our lived experience, so we actually begin to feel the rope burn in our lives when we're holding on, when we're grasping, when we're clinging. We can see this so clearly with our changing minds and bodies, or the minds and bodies of others. If we're attached to this body or anybody's body staying a certain way, it's not good news, because it doesn't stay a certain way. It always changes through aging, through illness, through accidents—always continual change.

Now, it's quite different and sometimes difficult to realize that all these changes in our lives, which are always going on, really in every moment—they're not a mistake. It's not that we're doing something wrong. It is the very nature of this mind and body. This is what the Buddha was just pointing to and reminding us and urging us to look at and to see and to take in. Everything changes. Everything is continually becoming otherwise. And this is what happens to everyone, to everything.

There's one simple teaching of the Buddha which expresses this very succinctly. When you read the discourses, as the stories go, many people got enlightened just hearing it. Ready? This could be the moment. But you really have to take it in—not here, you have to take it in here. He said, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." So simple. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Of course, I had read this thousands of times, and in reading it, I always understood it. Or rather, in reading it I would be taking it in on a kind of conceptual, intellectual level, just acknowledging the obviousness of it. Yeah, everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away. Then a few years ago, I was on a self-retreat. I was just sitting and meditating, and this line came to my mind. It was very interesting because I wasn't reading it and I wasn't even listening.

It just arose in my mind in the midst of a meditation. So it landed, or perhaps more accurately, it arose from within the very process itself. If you can get a sense of what I mean—it wasn't a concept out there somewhere, but right in this process of being with the flow of my experience, almost enmeshed in that flow, this line came: *Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.*

And then my mind did something that had a profound impact on me and my practice. *Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.*

This arose particularly in the context of the meditative experience. Because whatever we might want is also going to pass away. And just when that understanding arose—*oh, therefore there's nothing to want*—I could feel my mind drop back from a wanting, a leaning into the next moment, that I wasn't even aware of.

This is a tendency that is very common in meditation practice, so I want to highlight it: the energetics of leaning into the next moment. We're pretty present. We're there with what's arising. But we're there either in order for something else to happen, or in anticipation of something else happening. There's that leaning, an element of wanting in it, although it can be very subtle.

Let me give an example that you might be able to relate to. One of our contemporary teachers, the Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, often urges people in their practice to be checking the attitude in their minds. So it's not only being mindful of what is arising, but also looking: what's the attitude towards it? How are we relating to it? "Check the attitude" became like a little mantra.

One time—a different occasion than the first story—I was just sitting and feeling my breath. It was a completely ordinary sitting. Nothing special was going on. It wasn't particularly difficult, wasn't particularly profound. I was just sitting, feeling my breath. And then Sayadaw U Tejaniya's remark came to my mind: *Oh, check the attitude.* So I just asked in my mind, "Well, what's the attitude in my mind now?"

And it was so interesting, because something happened. It didn't even require an answer. The simple asking of the question was enough for my mind to settle back from a wanting that I had not even seen was there. And it was very subtle when I reflected on it. As I was feeling the breath, there was just some—maybe a wanting of calm, or a wanting of more concentration, something. And in the asking of the question, "What's the attitude?"—just the question itself—I felt my mind relax back into that place of non-craving, non-wanting.

This goes back to the earlier story: *Therefore, there's nothing to want.* Because in our meditation, whatever it is that we're leaning into will be just another passing experience.

And this is the key point. If you don't get anything else from this retreat, I hope you get this: the whole point of the practice is not about some new experience. It's about not craving. That's really what we're practicing. But I know for myself, and in fifty years of teaching, it's just so common that we engage in our practice with different kinds of wantings. And they're wantings for good things—that's not the issue. Wanting concentration, or wanting the *bojjhaṅga*, the factors of enlightenment that Dara spoke of the other night. But all of that is in the service of the mind of non-craving, because that's where the freedom is.

This is what's contained in the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths. There's the truth of dukkha—suffering or unsatisfactoriness, which I'm going to delve into a little more. And then there's the cause of dukkha.

What did the Buddha say? The second noble truth: the cause of suffering or of dukkha is craving. The third noble truth, which expresses the experience of the liberated mind, is the end of craving. And the fourth noble truth, of course, is the Noble Eightfold Path, the path of practice.

Are you getting a sense of what I'm trying to convey? This all ties together. It's through the seeing of impermanence—things continually becoming otherwise—that we see that clinging or wanting or craving is the cause of suffering. And our practice of being mindful of what's arising, being mindful and experiencing directly the truth of its continually changing nature—that's what leads to the mind relaxing back from wanting. And so we actually get a taste, even for a moment, of the third noble truth. We get a genuine taste of freedom in every moment when we drop back from the wanting, drop back from the craving.

It's very interesting. This is what happened when I reflected on that line: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, therefore there's nothing to want." I could feel my mind for those few moments not wanting. And then it was kind of looking at or experiencing the nature of the not-wanting mind. It was a very vivid experience—might have been for just a few moments—but a very vivid experience of peace, of freedom, the mind free of craving.

I am emphasizing this to the extent that I am so you have as deep an understanding as possible of the whole point of what we're doing. It's so easy to get caught up in the ups and downs and the stories and whatever's happening in our meditation. We can

forget why we're doing it. That's why this practice is so profound. It's not about just creating some wonderful experience, even a wonderful meditative experience. It's about freeing the mind. And we free the mind through letting go of craving, of clinging, of attachment. That's really what's being practiced through all of the various tools and methods and suggestions we might have.

The more we open to the truth of change, the more we open to it and experience it on a moment-to-moment level, our minds and our hearts relax and we really let go in our lives of so many causes of distress and suffering. So the first thing we learn through seeing impermanence is the ultimately unsatisfying nature of conditioned phenomena. As I say, it can be satisfying in the moment and for a period of time, but it's not ultimately satisfying because it doesn't last. And so the Buddha called this insight into the unsatisfying nature—the inherently unsatisfying nature—he called this the truth of dukkha, the first noble truth.

Now, dukkha is a Pali word, as most of you are familiar with. It has a very interesting etymology, which I think really conveys in some way our experience of dukkha in our lives—not the big dramatic, massive suffering, but even just in the ordinary course of our lives. This is the etymology of the word dukkha: It's said that the *kha* of dukkha, at least in one meaning, is the axle hole of a wheel—you know, the hole where the axle goes in. And *du*, as in dukkha, means hard or difficult. So when we are clinging or attached to that which in its nature is changing, the axle is not fitting correctly into the center hole of the wheel. Therefore we get a very bumpy ride in our lives because it's not fitting well. We're not in harmony with the truth of how things are. I find that a very clear image, a way of understanding what dukkha really means. When we're not in sync, when we're not in harmony, it's a bumpy ride.

So the second important implication of impermanence—the first one is seeing the ultimately unsatisfying nature of conditioned impermanent phenomena—the second, perhaps less obvious implication of this very basic truth in which Suzuki Roshi summarized all of Buddhism, "everything changes," is seeing more and more clearly the empty nature of phenomena.

I'd like to talk a little bit about this because just the word *empty* in English—people sometimes wonder, what does that mean exactly? The emptiness of things. One of the meanings is insubstantial. I'll give a couple of examples. Think of a time when you went to a really good movie, back in the day when we could go to the movies—absorbed in the story, caught up in all the action, feeling all the attendant emotions, being absorbed in the story. That's a common experience, and it's why we go to the movies, because we want that experience. But what's really happening? Is there anybody really getting

chased or falling in love or dying, all the things that we think are happening and are responding to as if they're really happening? But they're not happening at all. Really all that's happening is changing pixels of light on the screen. Because we're not seeing that—we wouldn't probably pay ten dollars just to see changing pixels. So that's an example of basically the emptiness of that phenomenon. What we think is there is not really there. We're in the illusion that's being created.

This is not to suggest that we don't engage with the stories, the dramas of our lives and of our ordinary conventional perceptions—because we do. We're living in the story of our lives in terms of relationships and just how we see the world. We've created a whole story that we live in. So it's not to suggest we don't engage in that, because we do, and we need to in a certain way.

But if we can also see on a deeper level, seeing the more elemental changing nature of whatever it is that we're engaged in, we don't fall so easily into patterns of clinging and attachment. Because on the story level, it's very easy to get attached and cling to what we like and enjoy, and try to push away and have aversion to what we don't like and don't want. On the ordinary conventional level of our lives, we're continually being buffeted by wanting and aversion, by clinging and aversion.

Even as we're engaged in the story of our lives and all the dramas of our lives, if at the same time we have some understanding, some really direct experience of the deeper, more fundamental level of change—the changing elements—then we can engage in the world, engage with other people, and engage in our stories, but we have a certain wisdom about it all. We see on a fundamental level the essential emptiness of it all. Then we engage without so much attachment, without so much clinging and craving, and our lives become much more easeful. We have a lot more happiness in our lives.

This insight into the insubstantiality of phenomena leads to an understanding of what in many Buddhist traditions are called the two truths, or the two levels of truth—that is, the relative level and the more ultimate level.

I'll give you an example. If you take any ordinary object, like a glass, we can have the glass and appreciate it, understand the design of it and the use of it. We do use it; we drink water out of it. So there's the reality of the glass. At the same time, if we looked at that glass through a high-power microscope—which, by the way, I've never done—we wouldn't see glass at all. We would see a whole different level of reality. There's no glass on the level of subatomic particles or atoms. On that level, glass doesn't even exist. And yet in our ordinary, conventional level of reality, it does exist and we use it.

When we can begin to see the more ultimate level of the insubstantial nature, it allows us to engage on the relative conventional level where we are mostly living our lives. But because of the wisdom we have of the more ultimate level, we don't get so caught. We don't get so conditioned by the clinging and grasping and attachment. And so our lives become much more easeful.

Another way of understanding our practice, besides the largest context of understanding that what we're really practicing is non-craving, is that we learn how to integrate these two levels of relative conventional ordinary reality and the deeper understanding of the more ultimate reality.

Using the example of the glass—it's one thing. It's not that ultimate reality is over here and relative reality is over there. It's the same thing, but seen from different levels, seen from different perspectives. There's a unity to it. In our practice, we want to engage the mindfulness with seeing both the conventional level of the body—taking care of the body and just our ordinary way of being with it—and at the same time, understanding the more ultimate level where, just as there's no glass, there's really no body on that level. It's just the elements. In Buddhism, the elements are talked about traditionally as earth, air, fire, and water, but it's really just the sensation level of experience.

There are a few expressions which convey the union of these two levels. One was from a Korean Zen master, Seung Sahn. He founded the Providence Zen Center and has many branch monasteries around the world. He died some years ago. He had a wonderful phrase. He said, "There's no right and no wrong"—that's the ultimate level. On the ultimate level of momentary change, of subatomic particles, there's no right and no wrong. "But right is right and wrong is wrong"—that's how we have to live. Both understandings. There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong. We don't want to forget either side of that.

Another expression of this same union is from the very famous Tibetan master, Padmasambhava—the being who brought Buddhism to Tibet, a great adept, a great enlightened being. He said, "Though my vision of emptiness, the ultimate level, is as vast as the sky, my attention to the law of karma—that is, action and result—is as fine as a grain of barley flour."

And you see, it's the same thing. On the level of emptiness, the mind is vast. And yet within that vastness, we need to be paying careful attention to our actions. There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong. This understanding leads us to take great care with the actions we engage in.

So here an important question arises: How do we go from a conceptual, intellectual understanding of all this—of these insights—to a daily lived experience of them? Because that's what is truly transformative. We can comprehend many of these teachings on an intellectual level. They're profound and they can have some impact on us. But the real transformation comes when we actually begin to live the insights, to see them very directly in our own experience. It's not just what the Buddha is saying or somebody else is saying—it becomes our own direct knowing.

Understanding this impermanent, insubstantial nature of phenomena is only half the story. The other half, which is of tremendous importance in our lives in terms of creating well-being and happiness for ourselves and others, has to do with one meaning of the word Dharma, or Dhamma in Pali. As you know, it's a Pali word with many meanings, so it's good to get some sense of what's included in this one term, because it is just so profound. When we say what are we practicing, we're practicing the Dharma. So what does that mean?

As I said, Dharma has many meanings. It can mean the truth, the law, the way things are, the nature of things, or just nature itself. It can refer to the teachings of the Buddha. Dharma is also the word used to describe all the individual elements of mind and body—they're all dharmas. So you see, it has very broad meaning.

In this unfolding map of wisdom, I want to emphasize one particular meaning of the word Dharma: the understanding of Dharma as lawfulness. Things are not happening accidentally. Everything is happening lawfully, according to different laws of nature. Things happen when certain conditions come together for them to happen. And if those conditions are not there, it's not going to happen.

We can see this very clearly in the physical world. The laws of science have described in increasingly accurate and refined ways how material phenomena come into being and change, the laws governing the unfolding of material phenomenon. These are the laws of biology, chemistry, physics, neuroscience. In science, I think, it's very easy to understand and connect with the lawfulness of nature. Things just don't happen randomly.

One example that might bring together some of the various things we've talked about so far: just think of a rainbow appearing in the sky. After some storm, a rainbow may appear. For most of us, I think it just brings a smile—there's a certain delight and joy in seeing the beauty of the rainbow. And then it slowly fades.

So what has actually happened? There was a physical process of some changing elements—air and moisture and light coming together in a certain way to create the appearance of a rainbow. It's a lawful occurrence. Given those conditions, a rainbow will appear.

But a couple of things to highlight about this process. One is that the conditions creating the rainbow were not always there. As the conditions came together at a certain point, the rainbow appeared. And then when the conditions change, the rainbow disappears. Right here, in this simple example—and everything is revealing this—it shows us the truth of changing conditions, changing the way we're experiencing the world. And then with even more attentiveness, more careful attention or inquiry or investigation, we begin to understand that there...

We really begin to understand that there is no thing in itself which is a rainbow. A rainbow is simply an appearance arising out of certain conditions coming together. But it's not as if the rainbow is a thing in itself. Is this clear? It seems fairly obvious.

The import of this, which I'll go into more detail next time—in Buddhism, there's a lot of talk about non-self and selflessness. Impermanence is pretty easy to understand, at least conceptually, even if we need practice to really see it directly, moment to moment. And dukkha is certainly easy to understand. But selflessness or non-self—that's not so obvious. People often have a lot of questions about what it means.

Somebody once asked a Tibetan teacher, "Is the self real? It feels real." I was going to paraphrase his response, but I think I'll just read what he said. To the question "Is the self real?" he responded: "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. You are real. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerate."

So in that respect, we're all like rainbows. The rainbow is real, but it's not *really* real. And it's just that understanding of rainbow which we can apply to this whole mind-body process that we call self, that we call "I." Self is a designation, like rainbow. It's a designation for this constellation of changing mind-body experiences. But just like rainbow is not a thing in and of itself, simply a designation for an appearance, self is a designation for an appearance—the pattern of our mind-body elements coming together in certain ways.

So this could be a good place to end part one. Next time, we'll see where all of this is leading. Hopefully this has created some of the foundational understandings of what our practice is really all about, the nature of insight, and the possibility of freedom.

Let's just sit for a moment or two. Please enjoy your rainbow-like nature.

CHAPTER 13

# Map of Wisdom, Part 2 (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · 1h09

> *In this second part of his series on the map of wisdom, Joseph Goldstein builds upon the foundations of impermanence and non-self to explore how understanding these truths transforms our daily lives. He examines the law of kamma, emphasizing that the motivation behind our actions—not merely the actions themselves—determines their karmic fruit. This understanding empowers us to become 'artists of our lives,' consciously shaping our unfolding experience.*
>
> *Goldstein offers speech as a particularly potent arena for practice, noting that four of the Buddha's ten unwholesome actions involve speech: lying, harsh speech, gossip and backbiting, and useless talk (samphappalāpa). He introduces the Zen teaching 'don't side with yourself' as an antidote to attachment to views, and presents the Buddha's challenging instruction on right listening—maintaining a mind of loving-kindness even when addressed with harsh, untrue, or hateful speech.*
>
> *The talk culminates in an exploration of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), particularly the crucial link between vedanā (feeling tone) and taṇhā (craving). Goldstein explains how mindfulness of pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones—without reactive attachment or aversion—opens the doorway to freedom. He concludes with teachings on compassion as the natural outcome of understanding suffering, quoting the Dalai Lama, Paul Farmer, and the Zen masters Ryōkan and Bankai. The practice of compassion, he emphasizes, doesn't require becoming special beings—we can engage fully as our 'average' selves, planting seeds that will flower into benefit for all.*

So tonight I'd like to continue the talk on the unfolding map of wisdom.

Just to recap a little from the first talk: we talked about some of the profound implications of the basic truth of impermanence, of change, of things continually becoming otherwise, and how attachment to that which in its very nature is change results in rope burn. It results in some kind of suffering. If we're holding on to something which in its very nature is going to change, we suffer in one way or another. To use the example that I gave in the first talk, with the axle in the axle hole—it doesn't fit very well. If we're attached, we go on a very bumpy ride through our lives.

We also talked about how, because of the truth of change, we develop a deeper understanding of the ultimately unsatisfying or ultimately unfulfilling nature of conditioned impermanent phenomena precisely because they don't last. That's why they're ultimately unfulfilling. We all know this just from our own experience, looking back at our past.

We also talked about how when we understand and look at the rainbow-like nature of experience, of self, we see that the self, like a rainbow, is a designation for the appearance of certain causes and conditions coming together. Just like the rainbow appears because of moisture and sunlight and air, so this appearance of self arises because of the workings, the interrelationship of all the mind-body elements. In both cases, the key point is to understand that the rainbow is not a thing in itself, but a designation for an appearance. Self is exactly the same process as the rainbow. The sense of self, even though we misunderstand it a lot, is basically a designation for the pattern, for each of our individual patterns of mind and body. It's not that the self is a thing in itself; it's rather a designation, a concept describing this appearance.

The Buddha expressed the importance of seeing this so clearly when he said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be adhered to as I or mine." Nothing whatsoever is to be adhered to or clung to as I or mine—not the body, not thoughts, not emotions, not any part of our experience. And then he went on to say something quite interesting. He said whoever has heard this has heard all the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings. He really simplified it for us in terms of understanding the essence of what we're practicing. Through all the methods and all the different insights, it's all leading or pointing in the direction of a mind that is not adhering to anything as being I or mine.

Now I'd like to continue with the experience of the real, but not really real, experience of the rainbow. Just as a kind of fun experiment, we might consider what the rainbow might look like to a being or other animals with a very different sense structure, very different sense apparatus, particularly with the eyes. If the eyes are constructed differently, clearly what is being seen is going to be different.

I was watching a nature program on TV—it was actually one of the series that Obama was narrating on national parks around the world. The last one was a national park in Indonesia, and they had these fantastic shots of tigers, showing the tigers hunting. Their prey was some impala-like animal, and the program pointed out that one of the reasons they are such good prey for the tigers is that the eyes of the impalas don't see orange. They showed through the photography what it looked like through those eyes, and it was so striking—such a reminder that everything we think we're seeing ac-

curately or definitively is simply a function of how our eyes and other senses are constructed. If they are constructed differently, what we take to be the real world would look very different.

It's helpful to remember that our perception of the world is conditioned by the structure of our sense apparatus, and to remind ourselves that it's not as if there is some fixed, definitive reality that we're perceiving out there. Our perception is completely conditioned by the apparatus through which we are perceiving things. This is what the Buddha called the magic show of consciousness. In some way, our consciousness, working through the sense apparatus, is constructing the world, our view of the world.

Perhaps for some of you, a question might be arising now: besides all this being of some philosophical interest—which for me it is, it's kind of mysterious—how does this understanding help us in our lives? I think that's really an important question for us.

is attachment to our views. We have lots of views about almost everything—even things we know nothing about. That does not stop us from having views about them. And we get attached to our views because we think we're seeing the world accurately. We forget that what we're calling our accurate perception is a function of seeing things through the filter of our own particular individual conditioning.

This attachment to view operates in almost every arena of social intercourse. It is the source of a lot of conflict because, quite unbelievably, other people might have other views. Imagine that.

There's a book written by the famous newscaster of bygone years, David Brinkley. He wrote this book with a wonderful title: *Everyone is Entitled to My Opinion*. And that's basically how we go through life. Of course we come into conflict, because everyone has that view.

The antidote to this is really very simple, and it was expressed by a sixteenth-century Zen master named Bankei. His wonderful book of teachings is called *The Unborn*—he was a very iconoclastic Zen master, and his teachings are very pointed. There was one line in his book which jumped out at me. I resonated so much with it as a practice. He said, "Don't side with yourself."

It's a good reminder. Even when we're engaged in conversation, when we have different opinions and views, can we remember not to side with ourselves? This doesn't mean that we don't have views or opinions, which we all do, but can we hold them a little more lightly? This gives us at least an opportunity to slide into the other person's mind, to see things from their perspective. In that way, it might alter our views a little

bit—or not. But at least we're open to taking in different perspectives, understanding that everyone's perspective is the result of their own particular conditioning. It's not as if someone has a channel to absolute truth.

But even given all this—the conditional nature of how we perceive things, phenomena within ourselves, the mind-body, and in the world—things are not arising chaotically. Despite the fact that we all see things through our own particular filter of conditioning, there are basic laws governing the unfolding of phenomena.

We know this from the laws of science, which have achieved increasing accuracy over the centuries—and I'm sure this will continue into the future. Science provides a pretty accurate description of cause and effect relationships, whether in chemistry, physics, biology, neuroscience, or whatever it may be. There are laws governing how things unfold, and this gives us a lot of information.

The Buddha described the lawful nature of how our lives unfold. So not only the physical laws of science, but there's an understanding in the Buddha's great wisdom about the laws governing the unfolding of our minds—what mind states lead to what results. This understanding has tremendous consequences for the experience of happiness in our lives. If we're not aware of the causes of happiness, then we're kind of just moving blindly through the world, hoping for the best.

But the Buddha was very explicit, clear, and incisive. Having looked so deeply into the nature of his own mind, he saw so clearly what leads to what. As you probably know, one of the most important and far-reaching descriptions of how this works is the law of karma—that actions bring results. But it's not only actions. What determines the karmic result of our actions is the motivation behind them.

This is a very important point. If we want to understand the causes of happiness for ourselves and others, and if we understand that it's the motivation behind actions that determines those results, it suggests very strongly that we have to learn and practice becoming aware of the motivations behind our actions—our actions of body, speech, and mind.

When our actions are motivated by wholesome states, skillful states like generosity, love, compassion, or wisdom, that's like planting seeds. Those motivations behind each of our actions are just like planting seeds that will germinate and flower in happiness. That will be the karmic result of those wholesome motivations. And if we plant the seeds of greed, hatred, and ignorance, that's like planting karmic seeds of what will bring about, in future results, different kinds of suffering.

This understanding, even in this most general way—and the law of karma could be broken down in tremendous detail—gives us a very general picture of how it all works.

It's tremendously empowering. When we understand it and reflect on it and begin to experiment with it in our own lives, when we see for ourselves whether in some way or other it's playing out in this way, it's empowering because then we can really shape the unfolding of our lives. It's as if we can become artists of our lives, creating those conditions that are desirable and not creating those conditions that are going to cause distress or suffering for us.

So we might ask ourselves the question, as we're about to act in one way or another—and I'm going to give one example of an arena that's very powerful to work with, but it really applies to everything we do. Whatever act we do, understanding the importance of motivation in this whole unfolding of the karmic law of cause and effect, the first step would really be to see: what is the motivation now? This takes a lot of mindfulness. We really have to pause a bit and just check in with ourselves. What is motivating this? And understanding what results will come—where is the action leading? Then most importantly, asking the question: do I want to go there? If we see that we're about to act based on greed or hatred, and we understand all this and realize this is leading to suffering, that's a tremendously powerful reminder. Maybe I don't want to do this. Maybe this is a time to restrain this action.

I want to share a short teaching from a Tibetan master. His name is Jamgön Kongtrül. He wrote: "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself. The Buddha said, 'I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you.' This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you."

That's a very strong and direct charge to all of us. We need to take responsibility for our own minds, for our own actions, for our own motivations. Nobody can do that for us.

So how can we begin to practice this? How can we really apply it in our lives? There's one particular arena of activity that I will use as an example, but it really applies to everything we do. In this one particular arena, it contains actions which have a profound impact on our lives, and mostly we don't pay attention to it. This is the area of speech.

Of course, here on retreat, it's not so much of a problem. However, we do speak a lot—generally, in the course of our daily lives, it's the main form of communication. But are we really paying attention to the motivation behind our speech? Or do the words simply tumble out? My experience is that more often than not, unless we really undertake it as a practice, they're in tumbling mode. We find ourselves stimulated by something and then the words come out.

Paying attention to speech and the motivations behind it becomes a very powerful way of integrating mindfulness into our daily lives because it's such a prevalent and common activity. The Buddha was very big on lists. It may have had to do with the oral tradition—creating things on a list is a good mnemonic device. Anyway, there are lots of lists. One of them is the ten unwholesome actions. This ties into the law of karma, and it's one of the reasons I feel such gratitude to the Buddha. He just laid it all out. We don't have to figure this out for ourselves. These are the ten unwholesome actions—don't do them. Sometimes I think the Buddha's teaching, especially teachings like this, it's as if he's talking to two-year-olds. Okay, don't lie. Don't steal.

There are ten unwholesome actions, and of the ten, four have to do with speech.

I find that quite remarkable. The Buddha singled out, of all the kinds of unwholesome activities we can engage in, four of the ten have to do with the words we use. To me, that suggests he felt this is a really important arena for practicing and developing mindfulness. This is a major part of our path, particularly living the Dharma in our daily lives.

So the four kinds of speech that are unwholesome, that should be avoided—again, this will be very obvious to you. First is lying, just saying that which isn't true. Second is harsh speech. Are we really paying attention to the tone, the energy of our words? Third is gossip and backbiting. With this, the Buddha gave a wonderfully simple directive for understanding and applying it. He said that we should use speech that unites people rather than divides them. Just that.

I find it remarkable because in this category of gossip and backbiting, sometimes it's just social, not particularly harmful, and not trying to divide people. But not infrequently, that kind of speech, either consciously or unconsciously, sets people apart. Because very often, we're speaking out our judgments. So just having that in mind—when we speak, is it uniting people or is it dividing people? That's a tremendous gift if we can really apply it.

And then the last kind of wrong speech—it's a little strange to say "wrong speech," but this is my favorite. I think it's my favorite because I love the Pali word for it. So this last kind of unwholesome action of speech, beyond lying, harsh speech, and gossip that divides people, is useless talk. And the Pali word for useless talk is *samphappalapa*. It sounds just like what it is. *Samphappalapa*.

When I read about this and really tried to practice it and see how it was working in my own life, it was amazing to me. I could be hanging out with friends in a social kind of environment, just in conversation. And from time to time, I would notice that I would say something that was totally useless. It had no bearing on anything. Really the only purpose of it was kind of saying, "Here I am." That was the only reason I could even think of for talking like that.

So it became really interesting, and this became a practice for me—and still is. When I'm mindful enough to see that I'm about to utter some completely useless speech: No, I don't have to say that. I really just restrain. And it's amazing, even in that moment, in this very small example, we can feel different things. First, the power of renunciation for shaping our lives when we use it in a really skillful way. Another word I like better than renunciation is *non-addiction*. Instead of being addicted to our habit patterns, it's like: No, I don't have to do that.

When I do catch that impulse and refrain from that kind of speech, it tangibly feels like a conservation of energy. Instead of just the energy spilling out, the enervation of that—no, it's like everything feels stronger.

So this is just an example, this arena of speech. It's a very powerful arena for beginning to check out our motivations before action and really beginning to see the karmic effect. I'm sure you know people who in your experience generally are very truthful, and don't gossip and backbite, and don't have a lot of useless talk, and speak gently. How do you feel about those people? You probably have some appreciation for them because it creates a beautiful life. But it's up to us. Nobody can do that for us. We have to do that for ourselves.

But there's one more part of speech that I just love talking about. It's not actually so much speech—it's right listening. What's the mind like when it listens?

This teaching from the Buddha sets a very high bar, and that's why I really like it. Because it's such a high bar, it really is aspirational, but it points to a direction. This is what he said:

"There are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you. Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or connected with harm, spoken with a mind of love and kindness or with a mind of inner hate. Here you should train yourself thus: Our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness."

So just imagine the scene. Somebody speaking to you in a very untimely fashion. What they're saying are lies, spoken in a very harsh, angry tone, with an intent to harm you, filled with hate—and our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness. That's, as I said, a high bar.

But I like it because it's a reminder that in the intercourse of communication, our minds are affected as much when we're listening as when we're speaking. And we can't control how other people are going to be speaking to us. So are we just giving our minds over to them and having their particular way of expressing influence whether our minds are wholesome or not? That's not such a good idea. The Buddha is simply pointing out that even in those most extreme circumstances, if we're being mindful, we can stay centered and just acknowledge that that's how they are speaking. It's not pretending that they're not, but it's not causing an unskillful reaction in our own minds.

This would be an amazing practice. I like talking about this because sometimes people think that the real Dharma insights and practice happen on retreat only. But it's not. The Dharma is a whole life. And the area of speech is just a common aspect of how we live. We can get to the depths of understanding our minds and our own reactions—what's wholesome and what's unwholesome—in this arena.

There's one other law governing our unfolding process beside the law of karma, and this is one of the deepest aspects of the Buddhist teachings. You may be familiar with it to some extent: the law of dependent origination. I'll explain just a few links of it because it really brings together everything we've been talking about over these last days.

It's obvious that we're all born into a body with different sense organs. If the body's healthy, there are eyes and ears and nose and tongue. The body feels sensations. And the mind—that's the sixth sense object. Because there is the body with the sense organs, and we're surrounded by sense objects like sights or sounds or smells or tastes, when they come together, that's contact. Moment after moment, there's contact between the object and the sense organ. This happens automatically—it's just a given. Every moment of our experience, there's contact with something.

The Buddha then went on to analyze exactly what happens out of that contact. Contact is a given. And then he said: based on contact, conditioned by contact, feeling tone arises. That feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—that we've been talking about a lot. In Pali it's vedana. This feeling tone also happens automatically. We can't stop that from happening.

This feeling tone is the taste of each sense experience. And I don't mean literal taste, but the taste of whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. All of this is just going on by itself. We have no control over that.

But the next link is what's truly crucial. This feeling tone arises, and here's where our reactive conditioning comes into play. We've been talking a lot about this. Because things are pleasant, because we experience them as being pleasant, we get attached. We cling, we desire, we want them. So it's the feeling tone that conditions the desire. If it's unpleasant, our reactive conditioning is that we don't like it, we want to get rid of it, we want it to go away.

This is the normal way of life for most people. And I think most people who don't really look at their lives consider this just normal. Of course I want what's pleasant and don't want what's unpleasant. But it's not a free way to live, because we're not in control of everything that happens to us. Perhaps it would be acceptable if we could arrange things so they're always pleasant. But that, as we know, is not the case.

So how can we find freedom given this alternation, this change between pleasant and unpleasant? Can we find some equilibrium? Can we find some ease, some peace, regardless of what the feeling tone is? Can we be at peace when it's pleasant? Can we be at peace when it's unpleasant? That's really where the freedom lies.

This points to the fact that we need to be mindful, as we've been discussing particularly in the morning sessions. We want to make the feeling tone, when it's strong, the object of mindfulness. When something is being felt as particularly pleasant, it's very helpful to practice at times noting: pleasant, pleasant, pleasant. The note here can be especially helpful because in the moment of noting, particularly if it's done softly, we are not identified with the experience. We're not reacting to it. We're being mindful of it. And so there's no desire, there's no grasping, there's no attachment in that moment.

Likewise with unpleasant feeling. I'm sure you've noticed that our immediate reaction to unpleasant feeling is usually not, "Oh good, let me explore this." Our instinctive reaction, probably for most of us, is: painful feeling, I don't like it, I'd rather it went away. So again, this law of dependent origination lays out how important it is, if we

want to experience some inner freedom, to be mindful of that feeling tone: unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant. In the moment of noting in that soft way, we're not identified, we're not reactive, we're not aversive.

It's very illuminating to begin practicing so that you have a real experiential understanding that we actually can be mindful of pleasant without the craving, and mindful of unpleasant without aversion. Even if it's for a short period of time or within a certain range. We might be able to note "unpleasant, unpleasant," and then perhaps at a certain point of pain, it's beyond our capacity. Fine. We've reached an edge, and we play around that edge a little bit, then come back to a more easeful place. But we're practicing it.

Particularly with unpleasant sensation, one of the ways I coach myself, remind myself, motivate myself to work with it, is to see it as practice for dying. Because we don't know the circumstances of our death, but it's not unlikely that it will involve some discomfort. The body is falling apart in whatever way it does. How do we want to be? Will we be to some extent at ease in that whole process? If we wait until then to practice this, it probably won't be that successful. But if we undertake this practice now, when there's discomfort or pain, we really understand this is a powerful training. Can I just learn? Unpleasant—it's okay. It's okay to feel unpleasantness.

But we have to train ourselves in that because it's not generally our conditioning. This is where the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination is really pointing—to just that place in the whole unfolding process where we can experience a real sense of freedom.

So the last aspect I want to talk about tonight, the last aspect of the teachings, is the experience and the development and the cultivation of compassion. Compassion is the natural outcome of everything we've been talking about during this whole week.

I want to read something to you which is quite an unusual way of understanding some of the basic Buddhist concepts. It was written by, or was in a conversation with, Lou Richmond, who's a Zen teacher, a Zen master, who lives in the Bay Area. I'm not sure whether he's still alive or not. But he came down with a very severe disease—viral encephalitis. It's said to be a devastating and often fatal illness. He was in a coma for two weeks. There was brain damage and other disabilities, and he said that it took three to four years to fully recover from it.

But this is what he learned from that ordeal. He said, "Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddhist teaching, I say this: Everything is connected. Nothing lasts. You are not alone." And this is him going on: "This is really just a restatement of the tradi-

tional three marks of existence—non-self, impermanence, and suffering. I don't think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as 'you are not alone' before my illness. But now I find that talking about it in that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer means that we are all in the same boat. And that's what allows us to feel compassion."

So there's a very direct relationship between our ability to feel the suffering in ourselves, to see it in others, and to understand the commonality of it all. We are all in the same boat. We're all subject to aging and illness and death.

As many of you know, there's a very classic Buddhist reflection on these aspects of life. And I love this reflection. It's very simple: Whatever has the nature to age will age, and I am not exempt. Whatever has the nature to grow ill will grow ill, and I am not exempt. Whatever has the nature to die will die, and I am not exempt.

I think we're all pretty easeful with the understanding that what has the nature to grow old will grow old. But it's the tagline that I find particularly powerful: "And I am not exempt." Because at least I see in myself that of course I know this intellectually, but I don't believe it. Deep down, I do believe it—but there is that feeling that it's really about other people.

So sometimes I'll use that just as I'm going through my life and some aspect of not feeling well arises, or I hurt something, whatever, and I'll remind myself: and I am not exempt. Because the previous thought probably was, or might have been, "Well, why did this happen?" Of course it's going to happen. We have a body, and the body goes through this, and we are not exempt.

To take that in—the Buddha suggests reflecting on this daily, to use these reflections, because it takes that repetition to really make it part of oneself and to grok it.

So what is compassion? It's really the strong and deep feeling that wants to alleviate suffering, whether it's our own or others'. And one of my favorite expressions, a phrase which expresses for me the essence of compassion, is the title of a book by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. They wrote it together way back, maybe in the seventies.

The name of the book is *How Can I Help?* It's a wonderful title, and for me it captures the essence of the compassionate attitude. As we go through life in different situations and different relationships, can we make that question the foundation of how we relate in situations of suffering? How can I help?

The Dalai Lama, who is such an embodiment of compassion—we use him as an example so often because for those of you who have seen him, either live or through some media, he exudes compassion in the most wonderful way. He said, "Compassion and love are precious things in life. They are not complicated. They are simple, but difficult to practice." I found that very interesting.

It's worth considering why such a beautiful and ennobling state like compassion should be difficult to practice. Why aren't we just drawn to being that way?

Compassion arises when we're willing to come close to suffering. That's the condition for compassion to arise. The problem is that even though we may want to be compassionate, and perhaps very often are, it's not always easy to open to the suffering that is present. There are strong tendencies in the mind that keep us defended from it, or withdrawn, or apathetic, or indifferent to the suffering that is around us. The indifference that we may feel is often unacknowledged. We're not even aware that we're being indifferent, but we're not coming close. We're not experiencing the suffering with an open heart.

As an experiment, the next time you're in a situation of suffering—and it could be right in this retreat—perhaps you're sitting and your body starts hurting a lot, or there's some kind of interaction, maybe somebody sitting next to you in the hall is very restless and disturbing your meditation. It's a minor kind of suffering, but suffering nevertheless. What's your first reaction to the pain, to the difficult circumstance? Very often we can see our first tendency may be not to want to open to it, to try to block it out or not experience it.

So it might be difficult feelings in the body. It might be difficult emotions. How are you relating to that? Are you open to the suffering and feeling compassion for it? Or not? With different kinds of emotions—fear, loneliness, jealousy, unworthiness, shame, discontent—there are so many afflictive emotions that are the cause of suffering. What's our relationship to them?

And of course there are all the many situations of suffering in the world, so vast: racial injustice, political and religious violence, homophobia, sexism—on and on. Climate change, with the huge amount of suffering that's unfolding. What happens when we face these situations, either directly or through the media? When we really come face to face with it, do we feel uneasy? Do we withdraw? Do we turn away? Or do we open to it?

I'm hoping when you hear these words, you're really taking them as an invitation to look at all this in your own life and experience. Because you can hear it as concepts, and you could agree or disagree. But the real understanding of yourself and how your mind and heart function will come when you apply and really look in real-life situations. What is going on? How am I relating to this? Am I open? Am I closed? Without judgment.

I saw these tendencies so clearly in myself during my India days. This goes back many years. Those of you who have been in India know there are lots of homeless dogs wandering around, and they're often in pitiable condition—starving, full of mange. It's terrible. I would be there practicing, and then in between retreats I'd often go into the village, sit at the chai shop, have a cup of tea, some sweets, and of course these dogs would be all around.

It was so interesting for me to watch my mind. There were times when, for whatever reason, I didn't want to deal with it. It's unpleasant. Just seeing it all—let me just enjoy my sweet. That was my mind. I could sense myself withdrawing, pushing against it. Then at other times, when perhaps my mind was a little more relaxed and open, I really let it in. I really opened my eyes to the suffering that was there. And not surprisingly, in that openness, the feeling of compassion just came spontaneously.

I didn't have to practice compassion. It came simply from being open to the suffering that was right in front of me.

So we need to look at all of this in ourselves. When we open to the pain and suffering in our own lives, in our own experience—and you can do this right here in retreat as you're dealing with difficult situations—the more we practice being open and coming close here, the greater strength and courage we have in being open in this way when we're out in the world.

Ryokan was a great Zen master of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Japan. He was beloved—this wandering monk who lived up in the mountains, a poet. Basically, he would just wander around. The stories tell how he would spend his days playing with the village children. He had a great, great open heart. And his great open heart extended even to inanimate objects. He just took everything in.

One of his little poems illustrates this, and I love it. He was this wandering monk, very poor, possessing almost nothing. He had this old beat-up begging bowl that he carried around for food. So he wrote: "I've forgotten my begging bowl, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl."

This points to an attitude that we can really cultivate—both toward the inanimate objects in our lives, but of course more importantly, toward everyone we connect with. This feeling of connection and openness and compassion.

Again from the Dalai Lama: "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend. This gives me a genuine feeling of happiness." I just want to repeat that: "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend." Imagine for a moment that you're doing that. That's an extraordinary level of presence and open-heartedness. Strangers—whoever I meet—can we treat them as an old friend? He said this gives him a genuine feeling of happiness. It is the practice of compassion.

As compassion grows, we can begin to engage very actively with the suffering in the world, responding to the various needs of beings in whatever way is appropriate and possible. Sometimes we respond in very small, unregarded ways, and sometimes with tremendous determination and courage.

You may know who Paul Farmer was. He was this great health worker doing fantastic work, first in Haiti and then around the world—amazing public health work. He was building clinics in Haiti, but on some days he would just walk to remote villages to see a few people. He was criticized for that because more people were coming to the clinic, and why was he taking all this time to visit these few people out in the mountains?

This is what he said: "If you say that a seven-hour walk is too long to walk for two families of patients, you're saying that their lives matter less than some others. And the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong in the world."

That's it. The idea that some lives matter less.

It's not just about hearing this and taking it in in some abstract way, but really looking at our own lives and the way we relate to people. It's not uncommon—I think it's probably common for all of us—that we privilege some people over others. This is the normal, conventional way of being in the world. But the Buddha in his teaching on compassion is pointing to something different.

And that's why it has been mentioned in all the Brahma Vihara talks—the universal quality, the immeasurable quality. They don't leave anybody out. We need to remember that, and just practice. It is a practice. We want to see if we can take advantage of the different situations in our lives to open our hearts in this way.

I think it's really important to understand, in listening to all of this, that we don't have to be saints or some special being to practice compassion. We can take advantage of the situations in our own lives if we have this in mind, if we really understand that

yes, it arises from being willing to come close, to open to the suffering. And then the compassionate response, in whatever way—sometimes it might be big things, and sometimes just a gesture of friendliness. Generosity can be very small things. We don't have to be some special being in order to practice this.

This was expressed by another famous Japanese haiku poet, Issa. He was a wonderful poet: "New Year's Day, everything is in blossom—I feel about average."

I feel about average. And still appreciating New Year's Day, everything in blossom. Just as our ordinary selves, we can engage so fully in all of these practices.

And we each find our own way. There's no hierarchy of compassionate action. It may be the front lines of work in the world. It may be sitting in a cave for ten lifetimes or a hundred lifetimes. Think of the Bodhisattva—how many lifetimes must he have spent in a cave before the energy of his full enlightenment flowered? And we are here 2,600 years later because of that energy. Yet at the time, you can just imagine his family and friends when he was off in a cave: "What are you doing? You're just wasting your time. Why don't you get a job?"

So be careful not to judge or create this hierarchy of what you think is compassion. We will each find our own way, our own interests, our own inclinations, as we respond in this way in the world.

We're planting the seeds—planting the seeds of compassion. And they may be small seeds and small actions. This is what Thoreau had to say about seeds: "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

I think that's a really useful reminder to us all. We're planting seeds of wholesomeness, of goodness. And those seeds are going to germinate and grow and have tremendous impact in the world. That's really what our practice is all about.

Let me close with a teaching from another great life master, John Lennon: "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment. And I told them they didn't understand life."

As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it."

That's our undertaking.

CHAPTER 14

# Saturday's Short Sitting & Dhamma Talk: The Power of Upekkhā

Joseph Goldstein · 1h15

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein illuminates upekkhā (equanimity) as one of the universal beautiful qualities present in every wholesome mind state. He explains that upekkhā, literally translated as "there in the middleness," represents an evenness and impartiality of mind that, when highly developed, becomes the foundation for unshakable balance. Goldstein carefully distinguishes true equanimity from its near enemies—indifference, apathy, and disengagement—emphasizing that equanimity enables spacious impartiality rather than withdrawal from life.*
>
> *The talk explores equanimity through multiple lenses: as a skillful response to the Buddha's eight vicissitudes (gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain); as the fourth brahmavihārā that allows mettā, karuṇā, and muditā to extend impartially to all beings; and as the wisdom quality that supports deep insight into the three characteristics (anicca, dukkha, anattā). Goldstein shares the teaching from the third Zen ancestor's "Faith Mind" inscription: "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences," pointing to non-preferential awareness as the heart of wisdom practice.*
>
> *Practical methods for cultivating equanimity include Ajahn Chah's teaching to relate to all things "as if already broken," the formal brahmavihārā meditation phrase "People's happiness depends on their actions, not my wishes," and the simple technique of noticing and adjusting the tone of one's mental noting. Goldstein concludes with the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's (MN 10) profound summary: "One abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."*

Again, welcome to everyone.

We'll begin this session with a short sitting, about ten minutes, as a way of settling back into our practice, into our bodies. And then I'll be offering a talk during this time.

So take a comfortable meditative posture. Relax, but not casual. And we begin by taking a few deep breaths. This is a way of settling into and inhabiting the body. If it's helpful, you might use the phrase "there is a body." This is a way of guiding the attention, the awareness, into the feeling of the whole body sitting. And then connecting with the feeling, the sensations of the body breathing, with the intention to feel each breath,

each half breath, from beginning to end. So it's reminding oneself to steady the attention in a relaxed way, and letting each breath manifest just as it does without controlling or wanting it to be a certain way. Just feeling each breath as it comes, as it goes.

If it's helpful, you can use a soft mental note, a mental label—very soft—"in" and "out," or "rising" and "falling." It's just a way of staying connected to the actual felt sensation of the breath.

And if there are other sensations which become predominant and call your attention away from the breath, open to and become mindful of those sensations. Sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant, whatever they may be—simply become aware of them, feel them, notice their changing nature. And when they're no longer compelling, return to the feeling of the whole body, the breath.

We can be with each breath, be mindful of it, suffused with appreciation. Each breath is giving us life. So can we appreciate that with every breath we take?

When you're ready, you can open your eyes and reconnect with what you're seeing in the world around you.

---

Today I would like to speak about one quality of mind that plays a critical role in the happiness of our daily lives, but also in the unfolding of our practice for awakening. From one perspective, we could say that the whole path rests on the maturing of this one quality. And that is the mental factor of equanimity.

Equanimity is the English translation of the Pali word *upekkhā*. It refers to one of what Buddhist psychology calls the universal beautiful qualities. That itself is a wonderful category—universal beautiful qualities—which means that equanimity and the others arise in every wholesome mind state. So equanimity is always present in wholesome states of mind, along with qualities such as confidence, mindfulness, non-greed, non-hatred, and pliability of mind. There are many of these universal beautiful qualities.

What's important to understand about all of them is that these wholesome, beautiful, universal qualities create happiness in our lives. They are the source. They are what constitutes the happiness that we can experience and find in our lives. So equanimity is one of these beautiful universals.

It's described as a neutrality of mind. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great American translator of the Buddhist texts, said *upekkhā* could be literally translated into English as "there-in-the-middleness." This is a little bit of an awkward English phrase, but it may conjure up for you some aspects of it—there-in-the-middleness. It's the quality in the mind of evenness, of impartiality. And when it's highly developed, it becomes the basis for an unshakable balance of mind.

We need to take a little bit of care in understanding the experience of equanimity. In English, when we speak of neutrality of mind, it might suggest, at least to some people, a feeling of indifference or apathy or of being disengaged from life. "Oh, the mind is just neutral." But all of these—whether it's indifference, apathy, or disengagement—are what are called the near enemies of equanimity because they are really unwholesome imitations of it.

As we explore how equanimity manifests in our lives, and the many ways that it does, we see that it is not indifference at all, but rather a spacious impartiality. We begin to understand why equanimity is called a beautiful state of mind, and it would be hard to overestimate its importance. Even though it's not spoken of perhaps as much as mind states like wisdom or love or compassion, equanimity has an equally powerful role in the unfolding of our lives, the unfolding of our path.

The first way we can experience the cool, restful quality of equanimity is in the peace and balance it can bring to our daily lives. I think we would all appreciate this. Each one of us, as you know, is touched by what the Buddha called the eight great vicissitudes of life.

These are the endlessly changing conditions that affect us all: gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain. These are the kinds of changes that are continually arising in the course of our lives as they unfold.

When equanimity is developed, we ride these inevitable waves with balance and with ease. Without it, in the face of all these inevitable changes, we are simply tossed about and often crashing into the changing conditions of our lives. Right there, we can see the potential for equanimity to create a much greater space of easefulness as we navigate our lives in the world.

We can see the play of gain and loss in so many different aspects. We can feel their effect whenever we're invested in or attached to a particular outcome, or in any situation when we're taking something to be "I" or "mine." If we're attached to a particular outcome, I think it's a setup often for frustration or difficulty or unease, because we are not ultimately in complete control of how things unfold. Many different forces in the

world contribute to how things happen. We can do our part with our aspiration, with our hopes. But if we're attached to the outcome, and it doesn't happen as we wish, it's going to be the source of difficulty, of challenge, of unhappiness.

One of my favorite examples of wonderful equanimity is expressed in a short poem by Ryokan. He was an eighteenth-century Zen master, hermit, and poet in Japan. There are many stories of him living in the mountains, very poor, with almost no possessions. He would just go around the mountains playing with the village children, leading a Dharma life. The story goes, expressed in one little haiku, that he came back one time to his hut and the few possessions he had—maybe his cooking pot or his begging bowl, whatever few possessions he had—had been stolen. As the story goes, and as the haiku expresses, this is what he reputedly said: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

That's quite an amazing response. Imagine coming back to your house one day and all of your prized possessions were stolen. Would that be your response? Probably not—unless equanimity has really been cultivated to a very high extent. I love that story because it points to a possibility. We may not all be quite at that level yet, but his things had already been stolen. What would have been the usefulness of his getting upset or ranting and raving about it? It would not have served any purpose at all. Instead: the moon at the window, the thief left it behind.

We can see another impact of gain and loss that is, I think, very current now for many of us—the impact of gain and loss in the intense political dramas that are playing themselves out. If in your daily life you follow the political news closely, do you notice all the ups and downs of your mental states as various political dramas unfold? When our views prevail, we become exhilarated and happy. When our particular points of view are frustrated, we become depressed or discouraged. Gain and loss.

Equanimity does not mean that we should disengage. That's not the implication. Whether it's what to do when our possessions have been stolen and only the moon remains, or we're dealing with a political situation or any other, it doesn't mean that we disengage. Equanimity means understanding the difference between reactivity of mind and responsiveness of mind.

This is a really important distinction, because these two words reflect very different mindsets. Reactivity creates agitation within us. Responsiveness is the basis for a balanced and compassionate engagement. This difference was expressed in a short Taoist phrase that says, "Non-action is not inaction." That's a really concise way of expressing it. Non-action means non-reactivity of mind as we face different circumstances in our

lives, different aspects of gain and loss. Can we be non-reactive? But non-action in this sense does not mean inaction. It means we can be with the situation, assess what needs to be done, and then hopefully respond in the most skillful and compassionate way.

In this sense, equanimity offers a great gift to compassionate action because it imbues these compassionate responses with qualities of calm and steadfastness and patience as it seeks to alleviate different kinds of suffering. And of course, these are the qualities—the calm, the steadfastness, the patience—which will allow for our actions to actually be more effective and more sustainable. One Zen master called these qualities of constancy and patience "the long enduring mind." It's that quality of steadiness in the face of changing conditions, and this is precisely the quality that equanimity fosters and nurtures within us.

We can also observe gain and loss playing out right here on a meditation retreat. We have a calm, concentrated sitting, and the thought may come: "Oh, now I've got it. My practice is going to be like this from now on." We expect it to stay. We expect the next sitting to be just like this one was. But the next sitting, or the next day, perhaps the mind is restless, the body uncomfortable, and we're bored. Loss. Thoughts come: "What did I do wrong? How did I lose it? I must not be a good meditator."

Gain and loss. If we're reactive, we're simply tossed about by these reactions. If we have developed equanimity to some extent, then we realize that these changes are a natural part of our meditation practice. As you know, practice goes through many ups and downs. It's not linear in one direction. It's more like a sine curve—going up and down, up and down—but the slope of the curve is rising if we persevere. Gain and loss, untempered by equanimity, by balance, by being in the middleness, keeps us in servitude to the inevitably changing conditions of our lives.

So this is the first pair of the vicissitudes: gain and loss. We want to take these inevitable changes as part of our practice, particularly being mindful of how we're relating to them. Are we relating with reactivity? If so, we should notice that and be mindful of it. Are we relating with equanimity, with balance, with impartiality?

The next pair of vicissitudes is praise and blame. This can become very clear when we pay attention. Notice how you feel when somebody praises you. Then notice how you feel when somebody blames you for something—especially if it's in front of other people, if it's public in some way.

I had a wonderful practice opportunity with praise and blame after my book *One Dharma* came out. In the publication of a new book, naturally one is enthusiastic and excited and interested, so I was reading the various reviews on Amazon—which was probably a big mistake. But it was a perfect experience of praise and blame.

Here are a few of those reviews. "Concise, enlightening, takes one to the core of Buddhism." Another: "A practical, enlightening book that is a pleasure to read." Praise. And then: "One Dharma is not emerging in this book; not as significant a book as the title might suggest." And one of my favorite blame comments: "This is pretty silly stuff."

So from enlightening to silly in one move of the cursor.

When I first read the reviews after the book came out, I could feel my mind glowing when the comments were praising. And then I could feel the glow dimming when I came to the blame ones. Fortunately, dharma practice came to the rescue. Remembering the universal nature of this—everybody goes through it, even the Buddha was the recipient of praise and blame—I began to see the humor in the whole situation.

As a side comment, a sense of humor is so helpful on the spiritual path, where we learn to hold things a little more lightly and don't take our minds quite so seriously. When I could have a bit of a sense of humor and remember the universality of praise and blame, my mind relaxed, my heart relaxed, and I could rest much more easily in equilibrium, taking in both.

The Buddha expressed this unwavering capacity of equanimity in one of the verses of the Dhammapada: "As a solid mass of rock is not moved by the wind"—just see if you can visualize this—"as a solid mass of rock is not moved by the wind, so a sage is not moved by praise and blame."

So the practice of equanimity is not just to be done on our cushion or in our formal meditation. It really is a daily practice in our lives, because it greatly enhances the quality of our lives in the world. It's truly a source of tremendous ease and balance.

It is important to remember that equanimity is a practice, and until we're fully enlightened, it certainly is not going to be perfect. But even when we find ourselves in the middle of reactivity—caught up in wanting or not wanting, trying to avoid or trying to hold on, being reactive in some way—if we can remember and remind ourselves of the possibility and the value of equanimity, then it gives us the opportunity to gradually guide ourselves back to it.

So gain and loss, praise and blame. The third pair of the vicissitudes is, in some ways, just a more generalized form of praise and blame: fame and disrepute.

Now the great lesson here—and this is one that has been so helpful for me over many, many years—the great lesson here is that even though we may hanker after fame or shrink and shrivel in the face of disrepute, they really only exist in other people's minds. If we are well established in the non-remorse of good sīla, of ethical action, of non-harming, then that is the foundation for us to remain unmoved in the experience of fame or disrepute. We remain equanimous in the face of these external projections.

Years ago, in the early years of my practice with my first teacher, Munindraji, he said something which has just saved me so much dukkha in my life. In regard to praise and blame, fame and disrepute, he said: "You can't take responsibility for other people's minds. You can take responsibility for your own."

That was so freeing, because it made me realize that we don't have control over what other people are thinking or feeling. That's going to depend on their own experience, their own conditioning. We can't take responsibility for that; they have to take responsibility for their own minds. And likewise, in acknowledging that we can't take responsibility for other people's minds, we realize we do have to take responsibility for our own.

That's why, to remain equanimous in the face of praise and blame and fame and disrepute, there is such importance in having confidence in the wholesomeness of our own mind states—in our own commitment to sīla and to non-harming. Because that is the condition for non-remorse in our lives.

The last of the vicissitudes, just part of the winds of change that blow through our lives—and this is a powerful one that affects us all—is the alternation of pleasure and pain, or happiness and sorrow, pleasant and unpleasant.

For most of us, there's a deep, almost hardwired conditioning in the mind to want and to hold on to what's pleasant, and to avoid what's unpleasant. Of course, this seems so natural. If we went up to anybody and asked, "Do you want what's pleasant?"—of course. "Do you want to avoid what's unpleasant?"—of course. It seems so natural, just the natural way to live. And because of that, because this is how it's commonly understood, we rarely investigate this conditioning or explore other possibilities.

There's a Burmese teacher, a wonderful teacher who has been teaching in recent years in the West, with a wonderful approach to practice and a wonderful way of communicating the Dharma. This is one of the things he said: "You only want good experiences. You don't want even the tiniest unpleasantness. Is this fair? Is this the way of the Dhamma?"

I think he's just calling it out—that this alternation of pleasure and pain, pleasantness and unpleasantness, is simply the nature of life. There's no one who experiences only pleasant things. And I think there's no one who experiences only unpleasant things. But because of our deep-seated conditioning to want to hold onto the pleasant and to want to avoid the unpleasant, it's precisely this reactivity that powers the roller-coaster of hope and fear in our lives. We're just living with this agitating energy of always hoping for what's pleasant and fearing what's unpleasant.

But with increasing clarity and increasing wisdom, we begin to understand and to see deeply that these changes are inevitable, that they're not a mistake. It's not that pleasant feelings go away because we've done something wrong. It's simply the nature of all conditioned things to change.

But for me, it's a slightly unusual English phrase, and because of that, I find it makes the truth of it very vivid. The phrase found often in the texts, when talking about change, is that things are always *becoming otherwise*. Becoming otherwise. Pain becomes pleasure. Pleasure becomes pain. This cycle continually goes on. Everything is becoming otherwise all the time.

The Buddha offered a reflection on this in a more macro way, not so much moment-to-moment. And he gave such importance to this reflection that he suggested we actually reflect on it daily. It's really simple, but it also uncovers some deep conditioning within ourselves. I saw that very much in myself.

The reflection has to do with reminding ourselves that what has the nature to grow old will grow old. What has the nature to become ill will become ill. And what has the nature to die will die. And here's the main point: *I am not exempt*.

I love that tagline—"and I am not exempt." Because even though we know the truth that what has the nature to grow old, to become ill, and to die will do so, even knowing that and teaching it over the last fifty years, I can feel deep within myself some subterranean feeling as some of these aspects manifest. A sense that I should be exempt. Or thinking that I am exempt, and then wondering what just happened.

I could be going for a walk and all of a sudden, I don't know, maybe my knee starts to hurt. And I can see often my very first reaction, my immediate reaction: "Oh, what just happened? Why did it happen?" And then, at this point very quickly: "Oh, and I am not exempt. Things are always becoming otherwise." Just that is enough to bring my mind back from this upset reactivity to a place of equanimity.

So there are ways, and this reflection is one of them, to really develop this strength within ourselves, because it's reminding ourselves of what is true. Again, from the Buddha: "Praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute come and go like the wind. To be happy, rest like a great tree in the midst of them all."

It's a beautiful image. If you just think of a great tree swept by the winds—the wind comes and goes, but a great strong tree can just stay steady in the face of that.

So the first type of equanimity is this evenness and composure in the midst of life's changes. There's another whole arena in which we can practice equanimity, and that's as the fourth of the brahmavihāras—those mind states called the four immeasurables, or the four divine abodes: mettā, loving-kindness; compassion; empathetic joy; and equanimity.

Now, equanimity has a special role in the brahmavihāras. We could say the gift of equanimity to the others allows us to express these beautiful feelings of love, compassion, and joy impartially, to all beings equally, to include all beings without prejudice, without bias, without preference. Equanimity keeps us unmoved in the face of praise and blame, and so we can have mettā, we can have compassion and joy, even for those who blame us when equanimity is strong.

This was expressed beautifully in a short haiku by the poet Issa, expressing how equanimity enhances or makes possible the fullness of the other brahmavihāras. The haiku reads: "In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger."

That's a beautiful expression. And we can see this quality at work sometimes if we are familiar in some way with great teachers like Dipa Ma or the Dalai Lama, and just watch how they relate to people. It's as if they are living in that place of middleness, allowing them to connect with all beings equally.

Reminiscent of Issa's poem, the Dalai Lama once said—and this itself would be a beautiful practice—"I try to treat everyone I meet as an old friend."

Just think what that would be like. If we could practice going through life treating everyone we meet—those we know well, those we may hardly know, those we may just meet in passing—what would it be like if inwardly we treated everyone we meet as an old friend? What a warm and engaging way, what a responsive way to live one's life.

And when we meet people or see people, not only those like the Dalai Lama and Dipa Ma—sometimes it's very ordinary people in our lives who just have this quality of openness and impartiality and equanimity, which allows the other brahmavihāras to manifest.

So there's the equanimity as a balance in the vicissitudes of life. This equanimity as expressed as the Brahmavihara is impartiality, embracing all.

The third manifestation of equanimity takes us deep into the experience of meditative awareness. This is really the wisdom aspect of equanimity. There's a teaching from the Third Zen Ancestor in quite a well-known text called "On the Faith Mind." The opening lines have been translated in many ways, but I think this one will be familiar to many of you. He says, "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When attachment and aversion are both absent, everything is clear and undisguised."

The great way of liberation, of awakening, is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When attachment and aversion are both absent, everything is clear and undisguised. This is really the quality of equanimity—of non-preferential awareness. And this quality of equanimity, this wisdom practice, supports all of the other factors of enlightenment: investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration. Equanimity is the foundation of them all.

When that becomes strong, we begin a deeper and deeper exploration of what the Buddha called the three characteristics of all existence. Most of you are probably familiar with these three characteristics. The first of them is the truth of change or impermanence. We begin to know through our practice, not that things change simply on a conceptual level, but we begin to experience it in a very direct way, seeing the continual arising and passing of different phenomena. Sometimes it's on the macro level—the big changes that are going on in the world, in our lives. And sometimes in our meditation, it's on the micro level. We're really seeing just the momentary arising and passing.

At this point in our practice, we become less concerned with what it is that's arising and more attuned to the process of change. In a way, we're going from content to process.

There are many stories in the texts of people getting enlightened by hearing just one phrase, which I'm about to say. So this could be your chance. It's very simple, but really take it in: Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

This is the universal truth of impermanence. But can you intuit the implications of that teaching? Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, attachment is simply going to be the cause of suffering in our lives. What would it be like if we really took that in and applied that teaching in our lives, remembered it in our lives?

We also experience the truth of dukkha—that is, the unreliable, the ultimately unsatisfying, and sometimes painful aspects of conditioned phenomena. Again, all of this is made possible through the power of mindfulness and equanimity, so that we're seeing things clearly and undisguised.

One definition that I recently came across of dukkha, which I really love and feel expresses the broadest meaning of that Pali term, describes it as "the inevitability of unwanted experiences." What a concise way of describing this aspect of conditioned existence! We can really understand change and impermanence clearly, but we may sometimes be trying to avoid the experience of this universal truth. This short phrase encapsulates it: the inevitability of unwanted experiences.

Given this truth, and given that it comes in our lives—things happen to us that we don't want, or things that we do want go away—this process is just going on all the time. Without equanimity, it results in a lot of suffering. With equanimity, we understand it with wisdom. We say, "Yes, this is just part of life, part of being alive." And so we can learn to relate to it with much greater ease and much less suffering.

Then we experience the truth of selflessness, because we're seeing that nothing lasts long enough to be called self. All of our experience is just a passing show. As our experience deepens, we even see that consciousness itself, the knowing faculty itself, is continuously dissolving along with every object that's being known. Even that, which is sometimes the last holdout of the sense of "I," of self—"Well, I'm the one knowing it all"—but when the equanimity is strong, safe, and profound, then even consciousness itself is seen as arising and passing, not to be held onto. There's no place left for the self to take a stand.

As each of these insights into impermanence, unreliability, and selflessness matures, we also pass through various stages of meditative experiences. These stages themselves are a field for developing equanimity, because some of them

We're filled with exhilarating rapture when we see for the very first time in our practice, when we experience for the first time, the very rapid arising and passing away of phenomena. It's happening so quickly, and the mind can become so exhilarated, so radiant at that point. It's a very blissful state.

And then at other times, we go through periods of really profound distress in our meditation. This is not a mistake. It's part of the natural unfolding of the path. We see that nothing at all in our experience provides true and lasting happiness because everything is continually disappearing and dissolving. How many beautiful and wonderful experiences have you had in your lives? Probably countless. Many moments of

happiness and pleasure and wellbeing. And yet, where are they now? It's not that they were not to be experienced and enjoyed in the moment, but we must always remember that they're not the source of lasting happiness precisely because they don't last. The Buddha was pointing to something beyond that, a kind of happiness beyond.

If we persevere through all of these different experiences in our meditation as the path unfolds, we then come to a maturing of these insights into impermanence and dukkha and selflessness in a stage of practice called equanimity about all formations. This is a very mature place of development. It's said to resemble the mind of an arahant—this is the kind of mindset that an arahant, a fully enlightened being, abides in. Of course, we're not yet arahants, and so we may experience this stage for some time, but it also is not permanent. Yet it provides the field, the very balanced foundation, for moments of true awakening, the experience of nirvana, the highest peace, to emerge.

I want to read a description from one of the Thai masters describing this place of equanimity, equanimity about formations. He wrote: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is seen as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own, a perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing."

I hope you've gotten some sense of the value and the power and the quality of this enormously beneficial mind state of equanimity. The question then is: how do we develop it? How do we strengthen this incredibly beneficial quality in all of its various manifestations, both in the midst of worldly activities and in our meditation practice?

I'll go through a few suggestions and touch on them briefly. The great Thai master Ajahn Chah had one example which we can bring into our lives in so many different circumstances. One time he was talking to a group of disciples—nuns and monks and lay people that were practicing with him—and he held up a cup like this. He asked, "How should you relate to the cup in a wise way?" Then he answered: "You should relate to the cup as if it's already broken." This so clearly captures both the importance of taking care of the cup in whatever way is appropriate, but also not being attached to it, because at one point or another it will be already broken. It is going to change.

Can we relate to all the aspects of our experience in this way? We can bring in both a profound seriousness about it and also a sense of humor—I think that combination can serve us well. Can we treat all experiences as already broken or already gone? Because it will be done. Then we can engage in as full a way as possible, in as loving and compassionate a way as possible, enjoying the moment but without attachment, because we're relating to it as if it's already gone, the cup is already broken.

The Buddha gave one other very practical piece of advice about establishing equanimity: it's strengthened by associating with wise and equanimous people. In a way it's such common sense. If we habitually associate with people who are very angry or agitated or greedy or reactive, if this is the environment we're living in, it makes it more difficult for us to cultivate equanimity within ourselves. We become influenced by the people around us. If we are associating with wise people, equanimous people, non-reactive people, then it's catchy. We begin to settle into that quality of being in ourselves and it actually becomes stronger. Then that becomes a gift we can offer to others.

We can also develop equanimity as one of the brahmaviharas. There is a meditative technique, just as there is with metta or compassion or mudita, empathetic joy. There's a meditation practice that we do. It basically goes through the same sequence of working with different people in different categories. But the phrase we use in equanimity is very interesting because the phrase itself is imbued with wisdom. I think this is what gives equanimity a particular power. Along with the balance of mind, there is the understanding of the wisdom that gives rise to it. This comes across profoundly in the equanimity meditation.

The phrase is—and I'll use "people" generally, though we could apply it to ourselves or to particular individuals—"People's happiness or unhappiness depends on their actions, not upon my wishes." Just that.

It's the realization that we can have the most loving wishes for people's happiness and their wellbeing. But ultimately, their happiness and wellbeing depends on their own actions of body, speech, and mind—and mind in particular. We can wish, "May you be happy," but if people are continuing to cultivate qualities of greed and anger and covetousness and jealousy and envy, we can wish for them to be happy, but their happiness does not depend on our wishes. It depends on what they're cultivating within themselves.

And so this phrase of equanimity actually brings about the quality of equanimity. Even as we are cultivating metta and compassion with a genuine wish for happiness, we can remain equanimous in whatever their situation is, knowing that ultimately their happiness depends upon their own actions.

Here again, I want to emphasize that this feeling of equanimity does not imply that we withdraw or stay disengaged. We try to do what we can, what would be helpful to do. We try to help others cultivate wholesome actions of body, speech, and mind, knowing that that's going to be the cause of happiness. So we engage in that way, really with a heart of love and compassion, but at the same time understanding that ultimately people's happiness or unhappiness depends upon their actions, not upon my wishes.

I have found in doing the Brahma Vihara practice at different times over the years, for extended periods of time, that each one had its own particular flavor and benefit. It was very interesting when I began to do the equanimity meditation and to feel that quality of evenness, of stability, of impartiality, of openness and connectedness, but with non-reactivity in my heart or mind. It was just being open, understanding the truth of how things unfold.

Let me share one very simple way of strengthening equanimity. This comes back to our meditation practice, our mindfulness practice. It's so simple it almost feels like cheating, but it works.

Suppose you're sitting and practicing mindfulness. This is particularly a function of the tool of mental noting—and particularly noting when things are either pleasant or unpleasant. Notice the tone of voice of the note.

So you're sitting and maybe you begin to feel some pain. "Pain, pain, pain." And in the note, you can feel the edge of aversion in the tone. Or maybe something pleasant. "Oh, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant." And you can feel the enjoyment of it, the seduction of it in the tone of voice.

First, the noting is very helpful in this regard because it's highlighting these reactions in the mind that maybe we wouldn't have even noticed. The tone of voice shows us what the state of mind is. And then here's the trick: simply by changing the tone of voice of the note, it changes our mind state.

If there's some pain and you see the noting is filled with some kind of judgment or aversion—"pain, pain, pain"—and then obvious suffering, you can shift: "pain, discomfort." Immediately, as you change the tone of the note, you can feel the mind state relaxing into equanimity, into openness. I would suggest you really experiment with this because it is so simple.

I want to end with one last story, an equanimity story. It has to do with using mindfulness of the mind, mindfulness of awareness itself, as a way of cultivating equanimity. I had such an interesting experience of this that it stayed with me and has become part of my practice.

This goes back quite a few years. I was living here in Barre, Massachusetts. In the wintertime, it's really cold. One year during the winter months, some friends and I went down to the Caribbean for a week's vacation. We went to a Caribbean island and it was beautiful. At every sense door, it was pleasant—pleasant sight and sound, the warm air, beautiful ocean, everybody going around internally noting "pleasant, pleasant, pleasant." It was very delightful.

The week was over, things became otherwise. Back to Barre, Massachusetts. It was in the middle of a particularly cold spell, like twenty degrees below zero. Freezing cold, icy winds. It was so cold it was burning.

I wasn't outside much, but when I did go out, the cold was so intense that it became interesting to me. I started just opening as best I could to the intensity of the unpleasantness—the cold, the burning cold. And what I saw in that moment was so interesting. The awareness, the quality of awareness itself, did not care whether it was cold and unpleasant or warm and pleasant. Because the function of awareness is simply to know. It's like a clear mirror reflecting whatever comes in front of it, not choosing to reflect this and not that, no preference. It just reflects.

The mind, awareness, just knows. And when I saw that, it was so illuminating—the possibility, at least at times and for moments, of exploring this. Sometimes perhaps in intense experiences, or maybe in more minor ones. Simply becoming mindful of the knowing aspect of what's happening. The knowing of a sight or a sound or sensation or smell, whatever it may be. And to explore in some way that quality of knowing that is not affected by pleasant, by unpleasant, by pain, by pleasure. It simply knows. And that is the expression, the manifestation of this beautiful quality of equanimity.

As equanimity develops, as it gets stronger, there's less reactivity to changing circumstances. We know on deeper and deeper levels that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

The Buddha repeated many times in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, words that sum up the fruit of our practice and where our practice is leading, the freedom that's possible through these understandings. It's what I'd like to conclude with.

The Buddha said: "And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."

For me, that just evokes this place of great openness and freedom. One abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

Let's sit for a minute or two, letting the words settle, coming back into the body with mindfulness and equanimity.

May all beings enjoy the peace of equanimity.

CHAPTER 15

# Sunday's Dedicated Questions & Responses with Joseph

Joseph Goldstein · 1h29

> *In this comprehensive Q&A session, Joseph Goldstein responds to a wide range of practitioner questions with characteristic clarity and warmth. He begins by addressing whether jhāna (deep absorption concentration) is necessary for awakening, citing his teacher Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's metaphor of crossing a river by motorboat versus rowing—jhāna helps but isn't required, as vipassanā practice develops sufficient concentration for liberation.*
>
> *Goldstein offers extensive guidance on working with doubt (vicikicchā), one of the five hindrances, emphasizing precise recognition and equanimous noting. He shares personal stories of practice difficulties, including his teacher's simple instruction to "be more mindful" and how bringing attention closer to direct experience transformed his practice. The discussion explores the Kālāma Sutta's (AN 3.65) emphasis on testing teachings through personal investigation rather than blind faith.*
>
> *Significant attention is given to distinguishing wholesome aspiration from unwholesome desire (taṇhā), the difference between equanimity and apathy, and how to work with resentment in giving. Goldstein addresses the overwhelm beginners may feel about Buddhist lists and frameworks, reassuring that mindfulness and mettā alone are sufficient—citing the Buddha's instruction to an elderly monk to simply "be mindful." He concludes with reflections on how different Buddhist traditions share the common aim of liberation through non-clinging, and encourages practitioners to trust the natural unfolding of practice rather than grasping at past attainments.*

Well, hello, everyone.

I think before we begin the Q&R, why don't you just sit for about ten minutes. I won't be guiding this—just as a way of settling into the space, into ourselves.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes mindfully. Mindfully seeing.

So I'm supposing that you sent in a few questions. Hopefully Ileana has picked the easy ones. Whenever you're ready, you can read them.

One question asks: Is intensive jhana practice necessary for awakening on the path? What do we do if we can't afford to step away for months and years on retreat to cultivate jhana?

Jhana is not necessary. For those of you who may not be familiar with that term, it refers to deep states of concentration where the mind becomes absorbed in the object. It's mentioned often in the discourses, but there's also a teaching from the Buddha that talks about people who have walked the whole path to liberation without having developed jhana. So while it can be a big help, it is not necessary.

One image might give you some idea of how it works. My teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, would say that if we have that level of concentration, if we've developed jhana, it's like being able to cross a river or a big lake in a motorboat. It makes it a lot easier. Without jhana, it's like rowing across. Clearly that level of concentration can be a great help, but for some people—either because of the particular conditioning of their minds or the circumstances of their lives—it may take longer to build the motorboat than to row across.

I think that's good to keep in mind. If it's possible and the circumstances allow and the mind has that capacity, it's a good thing to do. But if not, it's not necessary, because the Vipassana practice itself develops enough concentration for awakening, for the experience of nibbana.

Another question: I was reading books by Jiddu Krishnamurti, and he talks about the rejection of authority, the need to question everything, and that truth cannot be organized. To what extent is this to be understood? How far can we rely on a teacher and teachings?

Well, of course, if one follows that advice, one is relying on him as a teacher. So it's a kind of ironic statement. However, it points to something that I think is really important, and one of the things that attracted me and many others to the teachings of the Buddha. In this way of understanding, there's no call for blind belief or blind faith in anything.

The Buddha characterized the Dharma and practice in a very wonderful little phrase. He said often, "Come and see. Come and test it for yourself." He very explicitly said, in a famous sutta to a group of people called the Kalamas—it's called the Kalama Sutta—he basically said, don't believe anything. Don't take anything on faith. Rather, hear the teachings, whatever they may be and from whomever, put them into practice, and then see for yourselves whether it reduces—and in the end uproots—those qualities of mind that cause suffering, like greed and hatred and delusion.

It's only when we've tested it for ourselves and see for ourselves that this works—even if we have not accomplished the final goal—but from the very beginning, we can see: Is this really helping? Is it helping me become more wakeful, more aware, less attached, less fearful? Is it developing wholesome states?

In that sense, that advice is quite good. We want to take responsibility for assessing whether a particular practice and a particular teaching is serving that end. As many of you probably know, the Buddha often summarized what he taught in a simple phrase. He said he teaches only suffering and the end of suffering. It's not about ascribing to certain metaphysical beliefs or certain dogmas. It really is very pragmatic: Is the teaching, and is our implementation of the teaching, reducing suffering in our lives? We are the ones who can assess that.

That openness to investigation—not just believing something as dogma, but asking, "Is this working?"—I think that's what's very inviting about these teachings for many people.

Another question asks, "In the past few months, I'm experiencing doubt in my practice. I continue to sit daily and study Dharma, but I question the practice and wonder why I persevere. I also often feel low energy and continue with the practice because I hope it's just a difficult phase. Please give suggestions for getting out of this slump."

Well, there are a few levels to that. One is that doubt, as many of you know, is one of the five hindrances that the Buddha highlighted as being obstructions to the practice. And in some way, doubt is the most challenging because with all the other hindrances—desire and aversion and sleepiness, restlessness—we are in the arena or the ballpark of our chosen object. We may not be relating to it skillfully. In other words, we may be relating with desire or aversion or restlessness, but we're in the ballpark.

When the mind is filled with doubt, then we really have removed ourselves even from the arena of practice, and we're just caught up in the thought loops of whatever that doubting mind is, however it's expressing itself. And it can express itself in many ways—thoughts of "I can't do this," or "this isn't the right time," or "do these teachings really work?" There are many different manifestations of doubt. So when we're caught by that doubting mind, we're not at all in relationship to whatever the actual present moment is. And that's why it's particularly challenging.

At the same time, doubt, like all the other hindrances, is very workable. And the way of working with it is to see how quickly you can recognize both the particular form the doubt is taking for you. You want to look carefully enough at what your mind is doing, almost to be able to write down the sentences that are in the mind. It might be self-

doubt, it might be doubt about the teachers, it might be doubt about the teachings—whatever the doubt is, get very precise in how it's arising in the mind. Because from that precision, when we're aware enough and mindful enough of the form it's taking, then it becomes easier to become aware of it just as it arises. And that's the key to freeing ourselves from being caught.

So you're sitting and you're feeling the breath and whatever else is going on, and one of these doubting thoughts comes. As soon as you recognize it, make a mental note. That becomes the object of your mindfulness. So: doubting mind, doubting, doubting, doubting. And to remind you of something I mentioned yesterday or the day before, particularly watch the tone of voice of the note. If you're noting "doubting" but there's a lot of aversion to it, that will be reflected in how you're noting. So the key then is simply to soften the tone of voice of the note.

We're simply acknowledging, "Oh, doubting mind has arisen." That doubting mind is not I, it's not self, it's not mine. It's just a conditioned pattern of thought that functions as a hindrance. But if we see it and we can be mindful of it—and careful noting here is really helpful—in that moment of noting, we're not caught up in it. We're not identified with it. And so it simply becomes another passing thought, and we just continue with our practice.

So the first response to that question is to really give some emphasis to understanding, to catching or becoming mindful of the doubting mind as close to the beginning of it as possible. And that will free the mind from the deleterious effect of doubt when we're caught in it.

The Buddha had a very striking image for the effect of doubt on the mind. He called it the thorny mind, because it's like a thorn that keeps jabbing the mind, irritating the mind. And when doubt is strong and it's not addressed in this mindful way, it becomes a real obstacle in the practice. It can really stop our practice. But making it the object of mindfulness, it just becomes something else to note and to notice and to let go of. So that's the basic framework for working with doubt.

But then how do we work with those times that may have given rise to the doubt appearing in the first place? It might be times of low energy. It might be times when we feel nothing much is happening—you know, "I've been sitting and walking, and..."

A few things in that regard. I'll share with you something that goes back many years when I was practicing in India. I'd been practicing for quite a while, and at a certain point, for months really, my practice just felt like an indulgence. It felt like it wasn't going anyplace. So there was that doubt, you know—okay, what's going on here?

And then I realized, I talked to myself a little bit and I said, "Joseph, your job is just to sit and walk. Sit and walk, sit and walk, sit and walk. Do the practice. Let the Dharma take care of the rest. Surrender to the unfolding."

And that really helped me a lot because then it took me out of that thorny mind of doubt and just inspired me to persevere—to keep doing the practice, understanding that the Dharma itself will go through its various phases. At a certain point, we will begin to feel either more energy or some more momentum. So that's something to keep in mind: we do our part and then surrender to the Dharma.

There are a few other possibilities here. As you can tell from my response, your question reflects what almost every meditator will go through at different times. This is a common experience that we need to learn to work with.

One time when I was practicing in Burma, the conditions were not very good—the physical conditions. At a certain point, my mind was complaining a lot, which was its own kind of doubt about what I was doing there and what was going on, because the conditions were so challenging and difficult. I go in to see my teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, and I tell him that the conditions are not good, the food wasn't good, and this and that. All he said to me was, "Be more mindful."

The thought in my mind when he said that was, "Thanks a lot." I've come all the way to Burma and practicing, and the conditions weren't that great, and he's saying simply be more mindful. But he was my teacher and a really great teacher. So I leave the interview and I go outside, I'm doing walking, and I thought, "Well, I'll try it."

I became more mindful in the walking. I actually brought my attention in closer to the feeling of the sensation—of the walking, of the step, of the movement. And it was amazing because as soon as I brought my mind down right into the experience in a very careful way—and it wasn't forcing, it wasn't over-efforting, it was just feeling it very intimately, feeling the sensations of a step, the movement, the touch.

This is not complicated, and we don't have to have any kind of fantastic concentration to do this. It really has to do with what I mentioned the other day: refining the habit of the quality of our attention. When our attention is more casual—what I often call the state of "more or less mindful"—this could be in the sitting or the walking, where we're kind of there but not really fully there. Especially in a situation like you asked about, when it doesn't feel like much is happening and there's low energy—that's exactly the time to bring the attention in very close.

Again, it's a feeling of it closely and intimately. It's not over-efforting to do it. It's settling back into it. As soon as you drop into that level of attention, I think you will feel your practice getting energized. At a certain point—it may take some time—a kind of momentum builds up and more energy comes.

So it's all of these things. It's recognizing doubt, noting it, persevering, just doing your job, letting the Dharma take care of the rest. And then also noticing the quality of your attention and bringing it closer to whatever the object is. The situation is definitely workable, and I would encourage you to really play with this.

*Next question:* How can you discern the difference between delusional justification and wise understanding of a greedy or deceptive action that you believe will not bring harm to oneself or others?

I wish I could ask a question back to the question. Why don't you read it again, and I'll see if something lands for me.

*The question is repeated:* How can you discern the difference between delusional justification and wise understanding of a greedy or deceptive action that you believe will not bring harm to oneself or others?

Well, I think the answer was contained right within the question. If one recognizes that it is a greedy action—so if there's enough mindfulness to see, "Oh yes, this is just an expression of greed"—already that is indicating that a rationale for doing it because it doesn't harm oneself or other is already deluded. Because greed is harmful; it's certainly harmful for our own minds and very likely harmful for other beings.

Our whole practice is to uproot the causes of suffering—to really see through and uproot those qualities of mind, those factors of mind. These are the ones that the Buddha, in Buddhist terminology, called the unwholesome mind states: greed, hatred, delusion, grasping, cruelty.

There's a list of unwholesome mind states. And when we pay attention, when those mind states are arising, we will see that it is a state of contraction. It's a state of suffering.

So one experiment you can make, which will illustrate this—and as I say, this is not something you have to believe; you want to investigate this for yourself. But it's very interesting when we're sitting, could be sitting or walking, but sometimes it's clearer in the sitting. So we're sitting and just feeling the breath, feeling the body, and then maybe some greedy fantasy arises in the mind. Maybe it's a lustful fantasy, a sexual fantasy, a food fantasy—whatever is really grabbing us and filling us with greed for it.

Now, what's interesting in my experience is that sometimes we're seduced by the pleasantness of imagining what it would be like in that experience. And so that's the hook for us. We're anticipating some pleasure. We get caught up, and most of us at different times have gotten caught up in many different kinds of fantasies.

What's really interesting is that at some point you're sitting and getting caught up in whatever the fantasy is, even thinking at the time, "Oh, I'm really enjoying this." But then watch what happens. We're there, lost in it, lost and lost and lost. And then it goes away because it will. Everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away. Everything is impermanent in that way.

What I have experienced over and over again—no matter how seductive the fantasy was, which is really just a manifestation of the mind of greed, a wanting—no matter how seductive the fantasy was, when it goes, when it disappears, I've always experienced that as a kind of relief and release. It's like the mind has been let out of the grip of something and we're abiding then in a state, a space of much greater openness, freedom, ease.

By seeing that again and again and again, we're not so fooled by that rationale, which really is a deluded rationale: "Oh, this is not harming myself, it's not harming others, it's okay." Because it is harming us. In a very basic way, it's creating a certain environment in our minds that is grasping, is attached, is contracted. And we can see that clearly in the moment when it goes away. Right in that transition, we can feel a sense of relief, release.

The same thing applies to a mind state of anger. The Buddha had a wonderful description for anger because sometimes we are seduced for one reason or another by that mindset and we feel, "Well, I should be angry," for whatever the circumstance may be, not realizing that in that anger, we are suffering. The Buddha described this as anger with its poisoned source, poisoned root and honeyed tip. That's a really powerful image for me because it acknowledges that yes, the tip is honey and it's seductive and we justify it to ourselves. But the root, the source, is a source of suffering. And we can see that, we can really feel it.

So I think that as soon as you recognize that the mind states are unwholesome—of greed or anger, whatever it may be—then it's to realize that our rationale or justification for acting on it really is coming out of the deluded mind.

This is not to suggest that just by hearing this or even understanding it, all of a sudden we're going to never act on these unwholesome mind states, because unfortunately we do, out of long-established habit. But the more we see, the more clearly we see, we

begin to do it less and less and less because we're actually happier and more at peace not acting on those mind states. And again, this is something to check out for yourself—not to believe it because I'm saying it or maybe because it's in the texts. Really investigate and see what your experience of these mind states is.

All right. This next question is a little on the longer side:

"I have a desire to reconcile my practice of the Dharma with a sense of ambition for my life, to achieve and to become successful professionally, relationally, and monetarily. This means living up to my potential, being admired and valued for my positive contributions, to create pleasant experiences for others. Many motivational speakers talk about getting really clear about what you want as the first step to actually getting what you want. I get started on this path in regards to success and I quickly run out of steam when I try to reconcile this with my practice. This makes me feel stuck and like I'm not leading an integrated life as a householder practitioner. Please help."

Yeah, so fortunately, I don't think this is really a problem. I think it's more a linguistic problem. In English, the word "desire" can mean many different things and we use it in different ways. Sometimes we use the word desire and desire

It means it's expressive of a quality of greed and attachment and clinging and grasping. In that case, it is an unwholesome mind state. But desire can also be used differently—"I have a desire to be of service in the world," or "I have a desire to be successful." And the whole list of desires mentioned in the question, all of those mentioned seem totally fine and reasonable to me. They are valued—society values of how to live a full and engaged life.

So when we use the word desire in this way—"I have a desire to be respected by my peers or my family," or "I have a desire to contribute, to develop myself professionally"—whatever it may be, I think the key is to investigate. It's not about not having a desire for those things, because this is the use of the word desire in a very different way than the meaning of desire as greed.

The word I like better to express this is the word aspiration. We have an aspiration for certain things. Even those two words have very different flavors and connotations as we use them in English. Desire can easily slide into that sense of unwholesome desire, whereas for me, when I think of aspiration, that feels like a wholesome move towards something of value. I would encourage you to really investigate what those aspirations are and whether they are of value for you and for the world, for the people around you. If you feel that they are, then the aspiration for them and the working to develop them seems totally fine to me.

When the Buddha taught to lay people—and it's quite different from when he was teaching monastics, where there was a whole different level of renunciation involved—he had many lay disciples, many of whom reached various stages of enlightenment. But when speaking to lay people, he referred to and acknowledged the value of worldly success, of taking care of oneself in the world in a wholesome way.

So I don't really see any conflict at all. I think it's more that we can sometimes confuse one of the connotations of desire with this more wholesome move towards accomplishing our goals. It would be interesting to really consider what your goals are, but I imagine that for the most part they hold wanting to create happiness for yourself and others, to be of service in the world. Those seem like all really good things.

Another question asks, "Can you elaborate on how equanimity differs from apathy? I've been practicing treating the cup as if it's already broken, but it feels like day-to-day decisions matter less if it's all going to change anyway. How can we move forward in making decisions?"

I think the key is that in the practice of equanimity and using the example of the cup already broken, it really has to do with freeing ourselves from attachment to the cup. It doesn't mean that we don't appreciate the cup or enjoy it. Maybe it's a beautiful cup. Maybe it works really well to serve its function, keeps our coffee really warm or whatever. We can appreciate the cup and use it and be delighted if it's a particularly beautiful cup. But our understanding, when the wisdom mind comes in, we realize it's already broken at some point. And so we use it, we appreciate it, we enjoy it, but without attachment.

When conditions do change—and we've been very involved and engaged in various smaller and bigger decisions of our lives—we really do participate fully in what's happening, but we do it with the wisdom of understanding that things are always becoming otherwise. Being attached to things staying a certain way is going to be the cause of suffering.

So apathy is not caring about things. Equanimity is not being attached to them. That's quite different, because we can be in a very caring mode and a very engaged mode and still be living the wisdom of understanding the changing, impermanent nature of things. Then we are holding on less, and the less we hold on, the less we grasp, the less we suffer when things do change—as they will.

Another question: "Often in sitting meditation, I get a sensation of energy at the top of my head or centered between my eyes, which might persist for the entire session. Do I just touch it as I might a pain and continue with awareness of other sensations as they arise?"

I would experiment a little bit. Different teachers will have different approaches to this, so you can really try some different methods. One of my teachers for a while was Goenkaji, and he had a particular practice method—basically body scanning. But at certain points in the practice, he would say to keep your attention at that sensation at the top of the head. It's almost like—I don't know—in some traditions they might call it a chakra. We don't use that term very much in this tradition, but there are definitely different energy centers in the body that become very apparent at different times. In working with him, he would say that you can spend some time just resting in that sensation and staying there.

Not for a whole sitting, but more than just a few moments. Or sometimes he would say, well, just rest in the sensation at the heart center. So that's one approach, and you could do that for a little while and see what happens.

Other approaches would be, if it's calling your attention, to simply be with it for some time but not necessarily as long. You're with it, you feel it, and then you come back to just the mindfulness of the flow of changing objects, whatever they may be. There's no hard and fast rule for this, and I would experiment.

One thing to keep an eye out for is this: if you do spend a little more time at any one of these energy centers, really pay attention to the quality of balance in the mind and in the body. Sometimes people might do that and find that the whole energy system is getting tighter, or the mind is getting disturbed in one way or another. The key is to really be watching what happens as you're staying at those particular centers. If it feels like it's getting out of balance, or contracted in some way, or intensifying too much, then I would back off from that and open up to other sensations in the body, the breath, whatever's happening in the mind. But there's room for a little exploration of this.

Another question asks, how do we work with the resentment that comes up when we give to people who habitually take more than they give back?

I think this has to do with the fact that the resentment is coming from an expectation when we're giving. In such a situation, if we're moved to give something, it would be very interesting to watch and see whether there is some kind of expectation of one

thing or another. If there is, then the giving is still good, but it's a little bit diminished—the spirit of generosity is somewhat diminished by the expectation of something in return. If there's no expectation, then I think the feeling of resentment would not arise.

In the situation described, maybe it would result in you not being inspired to give to that person again. Or maybe not, maybe it would be fine. But given the fact that you felt some resentment arising, it might well be that you're not inspired to give to that same person. I think the important thing for us as givers, when we are giving something, is to really see what our motivation actually is in that moment.

I'll share one story with you. This goes back to my early days in India when I was practicing. Those of you who've been to India know that one of the realities of living there is that there are a lot of beggars on the streets, often young kids. They're all around, and we have to learn in one way or another how to relate to this experience.

One time, in between retreats, I was down in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, and I went into the village, to the bazaar, just buying some fruit. A little beggar boy came up with his hand out, and just without thinking, very spontaneously, I gave him an orange. It was not some huge act of generosity—it was just something quite spontaneous in the moment.

But then something really interesting happened. I gave him the orange, and he simply walked away without the slightest acknowledgment. I certainly was not expecting effusive thanks for the orange. But when he walked away without any acknowledgment—not a smile, not a nod of the head, nothing—I realized there was an underground expectation that I had not even been aware of until he left without responding in any way.

That was really interesting to me, and it started to interest me more in really looking and seeing: when I'm giving something, just to be open to what our motivation is in that moment. Is it just metta or compassion, friendliness? Is there some even mild or subtle agenda? To really look at this, to take interest in this—not to have a judgment, but just to see. Can we uncover more and more subtle levels of what's going on in our hearts and minds?

There's a line by the poet W.H. Auden which I really love, and which suggests a very forgiving quality toward ourselves and others. I don't know whether this line was in a poem or just some writing, but he said, "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart."

It's just the acknowledgment that unless we're saints, our motives very often will be mixed. Sometimes not—sometimes they may be really pure in the moment—but it's not surprising if we find mixed motives. The key here is to see them. It's not to judge, it's not to think we're terrible people because there was a mixed motive. But the more we see it, that is the process of purifying.

So that's what I would suggest in that giving—regardless of how it's received, our job is to be seeing what's going on in our own hearts. And each of these exchanges provides a really good opportunity. Sometimes we'll feel resentment, or we'll come to understand that we were expecting something back, and sometimes not. But all of this really is tremendously illuminating.

Another question says, "I am a beginner and I am old. I was feeling inspired by the practice of mindfulness, but getting a glimpse into the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and the lists within lists is overwhelming. I should have started this path fifty years ago, and I may never get beyond the practices of mindfulness and metta. It will have to be enough, but please, can you offer any advice?"

Yes. Mindfulness and metta is enough.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha about an elderly man who wanted to become a monk. In the monastic order, there were hundreds of rules—216 monastic rules. And this elderly man said to the Buddha, "I can't even remember all those rules. It's going to be impossible for me to follow them all." And the Buddha said, "Can you remember one rule?" And the man said, "Yes, I can follow one rule." And the Buddha said, "Be mindful."

So don't underestimate the value and the power of mindfulness, because mindfulness brings along all the other wholesome qualities. There are a group of mental states called the factors of enlightenment—qualities like investigation and energy and rapture, calm, concentration, equanimity. These are the qualities that, when developed and brought into balance, provide the ground for awakening, for enlightenment. And it's said that mindfulness, which is listed first, when we practice it, brings all the others along and develops all the others as well.

So I think you can really have confidence in your practice, wherever you're starting from. Mindfulness and metta will carry you a long way along the path.

And I don't know your belief system regarding next lives and future lives. But within the Buddhist context, of course, that is part of the teaching. And so no matter when we start our practice, we are cultivating the field of wholesome mind states which, if that's

true—and the Buddha talked a lot about it—will carry over from life to life and carry us along the path. But it certainly will bear fruit in this very life, just those two qualities you mentioned. So I think you can really have confidence in that.

Another question: "How can we know if we are ready for a longer retreat?"

I think that if you have the interest in doing it, you're ready. Because a longer retreat is really no different than a one-day retreat. It's the same kind of experience. It's only over many days. So if you've done a daylong or a weekend or a few-day retreat and you feel inspired, interested in doing a longer one, the interest itself, I think, is an indication that you're ready. And I would go for it.

I think it's appreciating, given the state of the world and just how turbulent things are—I have this very strong, one might call it a bias, that when conditions allow for us to do more practice, and that involves the resources to do it, the opportunity to do it, the time to do it, all the supporting conditions—if they're all there and the interest is there, I would definitely go for it, because we just don't know when these opportunities will arise again. And it's such a precious opportunity.

I first got into meditation when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I was right out of college, young, twenty-one years old, in Asia for the first time. It was my first connection with the Buddhist teachings. Some of the monks were leading these discussion groups, and I had studied philosophy in college, so I was asking so many questions. People were getting really annoyed with me. Finally, one of the monks said, "Joseph, why don't you try meditating?"

So I was young, I was new, this was all really new to me. I got my paraphernalia together, got all set up, set my alarm clock for five minutes because I didn't want to sit too long. But what was amazing—something really happened in that five minutes. And it wasn't a great enlightenment experience. It was simply the understanding, in that first five minutes, that there was a way to look into the mind and understand it, as well as looking out through it.

Most of our lives, we're just looking outwards, dealing and engaging with the external world. But to come into contact with a practice that provides a methodology for looking inward and really understanding our hearts and minds, seeing what's going on, understanding the causes of different kinds of suffering in our lives, and recognizing the potentials within the heart and mind for more peace and more compassion and more love—just understanding that there is this way, and there is a well-trodden path.

These are teachings that have been practiced for thousands of years and passed down to us. I feel this tremendous gratitude for having come into contact with these teachings, and then really taking the opportunity whenever it presents itself to ask: Can I deepen this? Can I develop it? It's just very rare and very precious.

And especially now, with this whole aging process—I'm sure most of you, many of you have felt this as well—time is speeding by. So when there is a chance, I would say go for it, if that interest and motivation is there.

*Does noting pleasant and unpleasant sensations reinforce our craving and aversion to them? And how do we work with them when and if they do?*

This goes back to the tone of voice of the note. If there's something pleasant and you're noting it with a quality of "pleasant, pleasant, pleasant," just sinking into the pleasure of it, then you're simply reinforcing attachment to it. Whereas if the note is really equanimous, just a simple acknowledgment—"oh, pleasant, pleasant"—we're experiencing it. It's not separating us from the experience of pleasantness, but the note in an equanimous tone, a soft tone, can really guide the mind into a relationship towards what's pleasant and unpleasant without feeding the tendency for attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. Because that's what we're trying to decondition.

Those reactions of the mind are so habitual. And I think I mentioned last night, it just seems so normal. Of course I want what's pleasant. Of course I don't want what's unpleasant. But there's another whole level of understanding, of relating, where we see that yes, our life is made up of this continuum, this changing process—pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant. If we're not reactive, not trying to hold on, not trying to push away the unpleasant, we don't keep ourselves in a state of turmoil. It may be subtle, it may not be some big struggle, but if we're really paying attention to our mind, we'll see that the mind is not at peace when it's filled with attachment and aversion.

The noting of pleasant and unpleasant is a way of aligning our awareness and attention with these universal aspects of experience—the feeling tone, pleasant or unpleasant, that arises in every moment. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is happening all the time, and mostly we're caught in the habit of our conditioning. The meditation gives us at first glimpses, and then more stability, in being able to be with pleasant, be with unpleasant, without the mind being affected by that. We're experiencing it—it's not that we're oblivious—but we're not reactive. We're simply open. The mind is impartial. And the experience of that is one of much greater peace. We're really at ease, not buffeted by the storms of pleasant and unpleasant, liking and disliking. So the noting, when it's done properly, can be a really big help with this.

*I am interested in committing more deeply to the Dharma. Most teachers say that you don't need to go to India or Burma or Thailand to learn the way, and yet most of them did go there and studied with Southeast Asian teachers. Is there really no difference between studying and practicing the Dharma in the West versus in its birthplace?*

There are some differences. There are positive and negative sides to both. Practicing in Asia, although it's getting increasingly difficult just because of political conditions—Burma is not an easy place to be these days—but when conditions allow for it, it is quite inspiring to be immersed in a Buddhist culture where the whole society values the practice. That's really inspiring and energizing.

On the other side, conditions can be difficult: health-wise, the food. There are a lot of conditions that are much more conducive to practice here in the West. So there are advantages to both.

I would say it's certainly not necessary to go to Asia. First, many Asian teachers come and teach in the West, so in that sense you get the best of both. And there are many experienced Western teachers who have spent a lot of time practicing, probably in Asia when there were not as many opportunities here in the West. That was certainly true of my generation of teachers.

So there was not much happening here when I first went to Thailand and to India. The opportunity to practice and to go deep in the practice is certainly available here now, and people have done that. It was one of the inspirations here at IMS for creating the Forest Refuge, which, as some of you may know, is a facility different from the retreat center where people can come for long-term practice. It's really not set up as a course model. There's some teacher support, but there's a lot of self-directed practice along with that support. We've had people come and spend many months, a year, and one couple actually spent almost four years there practicing. So there are opportunities here to really immerse oneself in the same way that one might have done in Asia.

How important is an intellectual understanding of the Dharma? Is it enough to just know the basics of vipassanā and vedanā that we have been taught here in this retreat and then just work with our meditation?

This will depend somewhat on each person's interest in further study along with the practice. Practicing what's being taught here certainly provides the basics for continuing. As one of my first teachers said, the practice is simple—it's not easy, but it's simple. So it's not hard to understand, and I think you probably have a sense of that already. The actual instructions in meditation and the guidance you can receive are pretty straightforward.

However, for those who have even some interest in the study aspect, it can be really helpful because it enlarges our understanding of what the Buddha taught, and the Dhamma is vast. Even though the path of practice is very straightforward, having a conceptual framework for understanding the mind and body can be both interesting and helpful for our practice. We learn things beyond what may be just our own personal experience. In practice, for example, we each have our own particular path and kinds of experiences that happen, but that's still a very limited part of everything the Buddha taught and what's possible.

I've found that study in different ways can be enormously helpful. Sometimes we may be reading a book—it might be the actual teachings of the Buddha, reading the discourses, or it might be books from more contemporary teachers discussing the teachings. Very often, while reading or studying, maybe there'll be just one line or one phrase that resonates with something in my own experience and unlocks something, or something gets clarified that I might not have thought of by myself. So I would say some amount of exploration on the study side can be really helpful and interesting. But how much you do really depends on your own particular interest.

The other part of the question: When do we know that we are ready to advance our practice to the next level? Also, what is the next level after we are able to concentrate well on our breath?

The title of my first book was *The Experience of Insight*, and the subtitle was *A Natural Unfolding*. That subtitle really expresses how the practice unfolds—it unfolds naturally. In some ways, and this may sound a little contrary to what I just said, knowing too much about the different levels and stages of practice can be a big hindrance, because then the mind can get filled with expectation and wanting and frustration. Things often proceed much more organically and easefully when we don't know about all that, when we're just doing the practice and letting it unfold as it does.

This is one of the things I so appreciate about this particular form of meditation—it's very organic. By basically following these simple instructions, using the breath as the primary object, the anchor, and then opening up to whatever else may be arising—first bodily sensations, then what arises in the mind, thoughts or emotions or images—we're cultivating that strong mindfulness of what is arising moment to moment. And then we're emphasizing or noticing the fact that it's all changing. It's just this, as I mentioned, empty phenomena rolling on. We're simply in that flow of change. And simply by being in that flow, that will take us through all the various levels and stages. I think it's most valuable to really trust that—to trust that it will all happen and unfold naturally.

It is helpful from time to time, while on retreat, to receive guidance from a teacher. There are different ways the mind can get caught or hooked or entangled in something that we might not see ourselves—this doesn't have so much to do with levels of practice, but with those particular moments of stuckness. In that respect, a teacher's guidance can be really helpful. It's really just a matter of unhooking from whatever we may be attached to or pushing away. That kind of guidance is valuable. But if we continue the practice, it will unfold. That's the beauty of it.

Someone asks whether I could draw comparisons between Vipassana and Zen, or perhaps between Theravada and Mahayana. The question of how different Buddhist traditions relate to one another was of great interest to me because I practiced in several different traditions. Sometimes it can seem like they're at odds with one another because they do emphasize different things. There are different methodologies and even different metaphysical understandings. For a while, I was really confused because truly great teachers in different traditions would sometimes be saying opposite things. And there I was, trying to make sense of it all—well, the Burmese teachers say this, the Tibetan teachers say that, the Zen teachers something else. Who's right? For a while, I was driving myself crazy with that question because it was really tormenting me.

But then at a certain point, there was a kind of revelation. I realized I was asking the wrong question. It's not a question about who's right. It was about seeing all the different teachings as skillful means. Instead of thinking that the teachings are statements of some absolute truth—oh, it's this way or it's that way—I began to see the teachings from different traditions all as skillful means. And then the question became: skillful means for what?

As I explored and investigated, I saw what was common to all the traditions. Whether it's Theravada or Zen or Mahayana or Vajrayana, all the traditions agree that the mind of freedom is the mind that is free from any clinging to "I" or "mine." If a practice results in liberation from clinging—and this is a phrase the Buddha used often in the texts, "liberation through non-clinging"—it is pointing to non-clinging to anything as being "I" or "mine."

This gets into the depths of the practice and what we learn from what seems like a very prosaic exercise of just being with different phenomena and seeing their changing nature. The deeper we experience or open to the rapidity of change, that's what deconditions the clinging. We can't hold on. Things are changing so quickly. It's like water over a waterfall.

I saw and realized, both from study and from practice in different traditions, that the essence underneath the metaphysics and even underneath the different methodologies is that they're all serving this aim of non-clinging. This became a very freeing way for me of relating to the different traditions. Any practice that we're engaged in, whether this one or any other, I think that would be the question to ask: Is this practice freeing the mind from clinging? Because that is the essence of the free mind—not clinging to anything as "I" or "mine." We open up to this really profound understanding of selflessness, emptiness of self. The different Buddhist traditions certainly approach this from different sides and different angles, but that is the essence.

Another question asks about the fact that the Buddha abandoned his wife, son, and parents, and how this can be reconciled with his teaching. That question comes up frequently. I think it has to be held in the context of the whole Buddhist cosmology of many lives and the aspiration to become a Buddha. This is all what's told in the texts and different teachings. I have no way of confirming this for myself, so I'm simply relaying how it's understood.

Given that the Buddha's enlightenment was a process that happened over innumerable lifetimes, the people around him over all these many lifetimes were very connected from life to life in many ways. Often the people closest to him were those who had made aspirations—to become the wife of the being who would become the Buddha, or to become the son, and so forth. So it's all part of a much bigger tapestry. In the last life, it was simply living out the final culmination of the Buddha's coming to awakening. The understanding is that all of the beings close to him were, in that bigger picture, in a supportive relationship to that unfolding. And in fact, the Buddha came back and shared the teachings with his wife and his son, and they became fully enlightened as well. So it has to be seen in that very large context.

Another question says: A few years ago, I was practicing meditation very consistently and noticing major improvements in wise action, speech, and concentration. During COVID, I lost this consistency and old negative habits of mind and body began to resurface. As I restart my practice, I find myself regretting the loss of continuity and judging myself for how I have digressed. What can I do to get past this state of remorse and reignite a continuous practice?

Let me share a sad story with you.

I had been in India practicing for quite a few years. My practice was going really well. At a certain point, the concentration was good, and the experience was one of feeling my whole body like a body of light. It just felt wonderful, really quite blissful. Every time I sat down, that's what it would be like.

Then I had to come back to the States to make some money so I could return to India. When I went back, I had completely lost this body of light. It felt like I had a body of twisted steel. I spent the next two years in just the way you described—wondering what I had done, caught in a lot of self-judgment, feeling what I had lost. I spent two years struggling with this idea of how I could get it back. It was terrible. It was the worst two years of my practice.

Until I realized that I had just been carrying a corpse around of these past experiences. What I needed to do, instead of struggling with all the feelings about it being lost and the struggle that came from that—it's amazing it took me two years to understand this—was simply to come back and basically be with what was happening now, to go forward rather than looking back with regret or remorse or self-judgment, which is totally useless and doesn't serve any purpose at all. It just agitates the mind.

There are a lot of things at different times and different conditions where we may have been going along quite smoothly, and then there's just a big disruption of one kind or another for whatever reason. When we finally come back to a place of being present and seeing what's going on, we just start right where we are and open to whatever our experience is in this moment. Maybe we don't have the same level of concentration that we did before—for now—or other things are not as settled. It doesn't matter.

I'm going to share a phrase with you which is very awkward English, but it's to this point. It relates to the teaching of the Buddha where it's said: liberation through non-clinging. It doesn't matter to what you don't cling. If you realize that the essence of the practice is non-clinging, then we can practice not clinging with whatever's arising. It's not clinging to good concentration. It's not clinging to bad concentration. Whatever it is that's arising, it's just another arising experience. Can we be with it? Can we be mindful without holding on, without pushing away, without greed, without aversion? Then we're right back on the path.

As you mentioned in the question, and as I've experienced, and as everybody else really has, we just go through different cycles—times of great ease and times of great challenge, for whatever reason. COVID was a big factor in many people's lives in recent years. But whenever we come back to a commitment to the practice, we just start right where we are. We can practice with depth regardless of the level of ease if we realize it's not to cling to whatever it is. Then our practice continues to unfold.

That's what happened with me. After two years of that struggle and self-judgment, it didn't go back to exactly as it was, but the practice continued to unfold. It gave me a lot of confidence in that. It just took me that much time to learn. I would hope it doesn't take you two years to get back in the flow of being with whatever experience is arising, just as it is, and practicing in the way that you've been doing over these past few days.

CHAPTER 16

# Monday's Questions & Responses

Joseph Goldstein · 31 min

> *In this Q&A session concluding a period of formal retreat practice, Joseph Goldstein addresses essential questions about sustaining meditation in daily life. He offers practical guidance on establishing a daily sitting practice, suggesting that even simply getting into the meditation posture can overcome resistance, and recommends at least thirty minutes as a foundation. He discusses the value of chanting the refuges and precepts in either Pāli or one's native language, encouraging practitioners to experiment with what feels most meaningful.*
>
> *Goldstein offers both a personal and classical understanding of enlightenment—describing it as 'lightening up' from self-referential habits, while traditionally it means the progressive uprooting of greed, hatred, and delusion (lobha, dosa, moha). He addresses how to work skillfully with difficult emotions, emphasizing that the goal is not preventing their arising but changing our relationship to them through mindfulness and non-identification. Drawing from the Bhagavad Gītā's teaching to 'act without attachment to the fruit of the action,' he explains how to hold aspirations and goals without clinging to outcomes.*
>
> *The talk culminates in an exploration of anattā (not-self), where Goldstein uses the rainbow analogy to illustrate how the self is an appearance arising from conditions rather than an independent entity. He concludes with the Buddha's profound instruction: 'Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine'—a teaching that encapsulates the entire path of liberation.*

I'm open now for some questions, and I see Carlita is here, ready to ask them.

Yes, indeed. Good to see you again, Joseph.

Good to see you, Sangha.

We have many questions that have come in. Thank you so much to each of you who have been bringing those in. Since this is our last day of formal practice, I did want to bring in some of those that have to do with continuing the momentum.

One of the questions that came in is: How important or critical is it to sit in formal meditation every day? Is four or five days out of the week enough? And if so, is there a set period of time that you'd recommend—a minimum of twenty minutes or more? Any guidance on that would be dearly appreciated.

Well, as a general principle, the more the better, because it will keep the momentum of the practice going. But as a general guideline, I think it is really helpful to have a commitment to sitting every day. One also does not need to become obsessive about it. If there are some days when, for whatever reason, it just proves too difficult, there's no need to be judging oneself for that. Just pick it up on the next day.

But I find having a regular daily practice essential. It's really important for myself, even after all these years, because it's a way of disengaging from the entanglements and the busyness of our lives and really refreshing ourselves, refreshing our whole energy system through the daily sit.

One suggestion for people who may be finding it difficult: somebody once offered an idea which I found really helpful. This is for an extreme case of finding it difficult. They found that what helped them was to make the commitment to at least get into the meditation posture each day. Anybody could do that no matter how busy we are. The commitment is just to get into the meditation posture. And what they found was that once in the posture, it wasn't that difficult to sit for some period of time. The difficulty was more in the disengagement from the busyness of our lives.

So again, have a general aspiration to sit every day, and find a time—generally the same time every day is helpful because then we get into that habit of it. But if we happen to miss that time, of course it can be helpful to sit at any other time in the day. And if it's super difficult, just get into the posture and then see what happens. At least in that way, you're fulfilling your commitment. The regularity of practice is really important.

How long? You have to see for yourself, really. If it's possible to sit for an hour a day, that's great—or even longer. Some people make a commitment to sit an hour in the morning, an hour in the evening. That probably for many people might be more challenging. If you find that an hour is just beyond what you can do at this time in terms of a regular practice, see what makes sense for you. I think it would be good to at least try to sit for half an hour at a time, kind of as a minimum base.

These are just some general guidelines. I would really encourage you to try to establish a daily sitting practice. It is just super important and will make your life a bit more easeful.

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Joseph. Another question that came in had to do with the refuges and precepts. We've been chanting those refuges and precepts each morning, and the question is: What do you think about reciting the refuges and pre-

cepts in English? Would that detract at all from the meaning and the practice of doing so? Is there an advantage, perhaps, in doing it in the original versus in one's native language, whether it's English or something else?

I would say to just experiment and see what is the most meaningful for you. It might be different for different people. Some people chanting the Pali might feel some kind of energetic connection through the ancient Pali language, realizing that this has been chanted for thousands of years. For some people that can be really meaningful. For other people, if they do it in English, they may feel like they're connecting more deeply with the meaning of the refuge. Really either way is fine. See what feels most meaningful to you. And you could experiment—sometimes perhaps do it in Pali, sometimes in English.

Yeah, there's no hard and fast rule for that. It's really about seeing what moves one the most.

Another question came in, and it's quite a large one: How do you understand enlightenment, and how important is it?

I'm going to give a Joseph definition and a more classical definition. I may have mentioned this in an earlier session, but one of my favorite understandings of enlightenment these days is simply *lightening up*. We're in a process of lightening up, which really means lightening up from our deeply ingrained self-referential habits. We're cultivating a kind of selflessness in this process—not taking our minds and our experiences quite so seriously. And again, as I've mentioned before, in meditation I've found for myself that having a certain sense of humor about what's going on in my mind is really helpful. That is a way of lightening up a little bit. So that's kind of a Josephism.

More classically, enlightenment really means the weakening and final uprooting of all those mind states and mental factors which are the cause of suffering. The Buddha framed this in a really simple way. He said the roots of all unwholesome mind states are greed, hatred, and delusion. So the process of enlightenment is accomplished through the very practice we're doing—by becoming mindful of what's arising and not holding on, seeing the impermanent nature of it all. As we weaken these forces of greed, hatred, and delusion in the mind, we suffer less.

At different stages in our practice—and there are levels called the stages of enlightenment—this happens for most people not all at once but progressively over time. At different levels, different defilements are uprooted. I think it's really helpful not to think of enlightenment as some kind of esoteric abstract notion. It really has to do with suffering or freedom from suffering in our own minds. And that's what becomes a great

motivation for us—both to free ourselves and then, as best we can, to share our understanding with other people. So for me, enlightenment is a very meaningful aspiration because it can be related to the immediacy of our own experience.

Another question came in that kind of touches into that, perhaps getting more into the *how* of it. The question is about feeling like with practicing mindfulness, we want to prevent difficult emotions from arising.

I would frame it a little differently in terms of the unfolding of the path. Rather than being attached to the idea that we want to prevent difficult emotions from arising, I think it's more helpful to frame our practice as being open to a way of relating to them so that we're not identified with them when they arise. Because different emotions are going to come, and unpleasant emotions that cause suffering will arise to some extent or another until we're fully enlightened—until all the unwholesome roots are uprooted from our mind stream. For most of us, that'll be a little way off anyway. We can expect these emotions to arise at different times due to the different circumstances and conditions of our lives.

The key for our practice is: can we relate to them in a way that doesn't cause us as much suffering? This has to do with how we're relating to them. For example, if anger arises, which is an unpleasant emotion, and we're caught in the story of it, there's a lot of suffering. But if we are mindful of the anger and exploring the experience of the energy of anger—taking interest in that particular experience with mindfulness, being with it without identifying with it as being I or mine, seeing it as an impersonal arising appearance due to certain conditions—then our relationship to it has really changed, and we become much more easeful.

There's one image which is a little unusual, but it's striking. It's a paraphrase from a Tibetan text talking about how thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds in the sky. Can we be with them and really be resting in the awareness of the sky, seeing these as just appearances coming and going in that space? What happens is that we *root* the clouds through identifying with them, claiming them to be *my* anger or *I'm* angry. But the *my* or the *I* is extra.

The image is a little bit amusing. When we are identified with an emotion like that, it's like having a root come down from the cloud to the earth. Of course, that's a ridiculous image, but that's what we're doing when we are identified with these difficult emotions. It's not the emotion itself that's the real problem—as I say, they are going to arise until our minds are completely purified. But we can learn how to relate to them in an increasingly freer way. It's okay to feel them if we're mindful, if we're not caught up in them.

And here, the noting is a real help, and particularly the quality of interest. So just for myself, over all these years, I've learned—it's a phrase I use these days—not to waste my suffering. Meaning when the mind is upset in one way or another, it piques my interest. It's like, okay, something's going on in my mind that's causing distress of one kind or another. Can I investigate? Can I take interest in what's going on in the mind that's creating that suffering? And there is something, some way we're relating that is not skillful. So that interest really is a very freeing attitude, because when we're interested, we're no longer caught or identified with it.

One of the very first connections I had with the understandings of wisdom from the East happened when I was in college. I didn't know anything about Buddhism, but I was taking a course in Eastern philosophy and we were reading the Bhagavad Gita, which is this great Hindu text. And one line just jumped out at me. Again, I was young, I didn't know anything about any of this, but for some reason this one line resonated. And it's really the essence also of the Buddhist teachings. The line said, "Act without attachment to the fruit of the action." Act without attachment to the result.

So it doesn't mean that we don't have aspirations and we don't have goals, because we can. But can we realize that a lot of conditions are outside of our control? We can devote a lot of energy and effort to our aspiration, realizing that the outcome will be what it is. And if we can let go of our attachment to the outcome—which doesn't mean not having an aspiration for it, it just means realizing that we are not in complete control of how things unfold—there's a lot of freedom in that. There's a freedom, and it actually frees up a lot of energy that may have been bound up in attachment to having the goal be realized. That energy we can use in the pursuit of the aspiration. And we're doing it then in a much freer mind space. It makes our mind, I think, more creative and more flexible as a particular path for whatever it is that we're aspiring to unfolds.

So I think that's really the key. The problem is not having aspirations, because we all do. I mean, it's the reason we do things, right? Because we'd like to see some kind of outcome. But can we hold it more lightly? Still with the energy to achieve it, but not with that attachment—or I might say obsessive attachment—to the result. And for me, that has just been very, very freeing.

Just one more thing on this. I'll relate it actually to our meditation practice, because we can have the aspiration for awakening, for enlightenment. We can have the highest aspiration. But if we have expectation—which is another word for attachment—if we have an expectation in each of our sittings for the sitting to be a certain way, it's a lot of suffering. Because as I'm sure you've all realized by now, the dharma has a life of its own in our sitting experience, many ups and downs, and they will not always fit our ex-

pectation of what we'd like the next sitting to be. So we still have the aspiration, which sets the direction for where we're going. And then we stay free in our experience of how that particular pursuit unfolds for us. This is true both in meditation practice and also in our more worldly aspirations.

Now, on the relationship between equanimity and dispassion: I think if we are in a dispassionate state, the mind will naturally be in that quality of equanimity and impartiality because it's not being conditioned by attachment or by aversion. But it's important to understand from a Buddhist perspective what dispassion means, because in English we may have all kinds of connotations with that word—of meaning not caring or perhaps indifference. And that's not really what dispassion means in the Buddhist sense.

It means being free from the craving of greed, of clinging, of grasping. There's a coolness in dispassion that is still very connected with our experience, but connected in a very open and impartial way. As I mentioned in my talk on equanimity, be watchful that you don't infer from these words some sense of disengagement, because it's not that. We are fully there and fully with each experience, just not being reactive to what's arising. And I think that's really the meaning of dispassion—it is the quality of equanimity.

We've had a number of questions come in regarding no-self. One of these questions reads: "Would you please elaborate on no-self? It's here that my practice comes to a screeching halt. It seems self-focused to use habits of mind to shift hindrances. The hindrances are appearing to 'me' and affect 'my' experience. Where is the no-self in this?"

This could definitely be at least an hour talk, and then maybe many, many more hours. But I'll just highlight a few things. Even in the way the question was asked, the "I" in the mind was extra. Hindrances are arising. There can be the experience of the hindrance, the knowing of anger, the knowing of desire. Claiming either the knowing or the particular hindrance as "I" or "mine" is a whole extra process. We can be in the experience free of that identification with it.

Then the question arises, "Well, I'm the one who's seeing that it's a hindrance and wanting to remove them." Again, the "I" is extra, because we could understand it as the wisdom factor of mind understanding that the hindrances are unwholesome and the cause of suffering. We could say it's the wisdom which leads to the decision to do a kind of practice that will minimize or weaken the force of the hindrances. So we can begin to see it all as an impersonal process—just the working out of different mind states and different mental factors, each serving their own function.

One way of encapsulating this in language might be to say: it's the thought that is the thinker. It's not that the thought belongs to me; the thought itself is arising out of different conditions, and the thought is the thinker. We could say that it's anger that angers, it's love that loves, it's fear that fears. Each of these qualities and aspects of experience manifests in its own way, having its own effect, but we have been strongly conditioned to identify with each of these. That's where the creation of the felt sense of self comes about. It's not that there is a self there in the first place. There are just all of these impersonal sensations of the body, thoughts and emotions of the mind, all manifesting their own nature. And then there's another mental process—which is also impersonal—but that process identifies with what's happening. In that process of identification, there is that felt sense of self. So that's one frame for understanding.

Another frame for understanding selflessness points to an important aspect of this discussion. It's an example I've used very often. Think of a rainbow. There's a rainstorm, and then after the rain, the sun might come out, and sometimes we see this beautiful rainbow in the sky. We all enjoy it. We usually take delight in that experience—it's beautiful. But with some interest, we could ask the question: what actually is a rainbow? We see that a rainbow is an appearance that arises when certain conditions of air and light and moisture come together in a certain way. There are these elements of experience, elements of nature coming together, and when they come together, a rainbow appears. But there's no thing in and of itself which is a rainbow, independent of those conditions. Rainbow is an appearance coming out of the conditions.

So we could say that self is like the rainbow. It's not something that exists in and of itself, but there is an appearance when certain conditions of mind and body come together.

So this is summed up beautifully by another Tibetan teacher. Somebody was asking basically this question: Is the self real? And this teacher had a great response. He said, "Yes, it is real." And that's like saying yes, we all have the experience of the rainbow. The rainbow is real in that sense. So he said, "Yes, the self is real, but it's not *really* real."

I think that points to what we could call the relative truth—the relative experience of the self as a conventional designation for all of these conditions coming together. But when we investigate what that designation refers to, rather than just getting attached to the designation itself, when we start to investigate—okay, self is a designation for a combination of different mind-body elements, all of which are in constant change and flow and flux—that's when we begin to experience the three characteristics and the empty nature, the empty-of-self nature, of all this phenomena.

But still on the relative level, the conventional level, we use the word self, and we often have some experience, some felt sense of it. So it's real in that sense, but it's not really real. And we can discover the "not really real" part through the investigation that we've been doing.

I think that may be a good note to end on, because that really gets to the heart of what our practice is about. Referring back again to the question of enlightenment and awakening and the path and daily practice, it's summed up in one teaching of the Buddha where he said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Whoever has heard this has heard all of the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all of the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings."

So everything we do—all the various methods and techniques and suggestions—are really in the service of this very profound understanding of the nature of our minds and bodies, of who we are. Nothing whatsoever. Not in the mind, not in the body, not externally, not internally. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Everything is simply what it is, and the "I" and "mine" is extra.

Whoever has practiced this and realized this has realized all the teachings. And this is what makes this practice so liberating.

CHAPTER 17

# Working with Thoughts and Emotions

Joseph Goldstein · 1h02

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses two of the most pervasive aspects of human experience: thoughts and emotions. He frames the discussion within the Buddhist understanding of relative and ultimate truth—examining how we can work with the content of our mental experiences (the karmic level) while also recognizing their empty, ephemeral nature.*
>
> *Drawing from the Dhammapada and the Buddha's own account of his practice as a bodhisattva, Goldstein explains how to discern between wholesome and unwholesome thoughts, noting that "whatever we frequently think about and ponder, that will become the inclination of our minds." He introduces practical exercises for catching what Dudjom Rinpoche called "the thieves of meditation"—the subtle undercurrent of unnoticed thoughts that carry us away from awareness. The talk illuminates the full meaning of sati (mindfulness) as both remembering what is skillful and remembering the present moment.*
>
> *Goldstein then explores the complex territory of emotions, showing how thoughts often trigger emotional responses and how we can learn to feel emotions fully without identifying with them as "I" or "mine." Using the beautiful metaphor of clouds wandering rootlessly in the sky, he points toward the liberating recognition that emotions arise from conditions and pass away as conditions change. This understanding, he emphasizes, doesn't mean emotional detachment but rather opens the possibility of experiencing feelings fully while remaining free from their dominating power.*

Today I'd like to talk about two of the most predominant and far-reaching aspects of our experience—aspects that condition both our suffering and our happiness, and that play out both in our meditation practice and in our lives. These are the realms of thought and emotion.

In order to have a fuller understanding of how to work with these forces in the mind, it's helpful to place them in the framework of two overarching principles in the Buddhist teachings. These are the principles of relative truth and more ultimate truth. We can understand these two levels in terms of karma and emptiness, or of content and process. We can look at thoughts and emotions from each of these perspectives, understanding that each perspective helps to balance the other.

It's important to consider both of these levels, the relative and the more ultimate, because one of the dangers in spiritual practice and in meditation practice is becoming attached to or overemphasizing one side or the other. As you probably are familiar with, we can easily become immersed in and attached to the content of our stories, the movies of our minds. But we can also become attached to the idea of emptiness, leading to what is sometimes called spiritual bypassing, where we dismiss whatever's arising as simply being empty, and so don't pay attention to things when they need attention being paid to them.

The Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim had a wonderful little phrase describing the balance of these two, the relative and the more ultimate. He said, "There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." On the level of no right, no wrong, it's all empty phenomena. And at the same time, even as we understand things being empty of substantial existence, inherent existence, still right is right and wrong is wrong. This is our challenge: to really integrate these two levels of understanding.

The importance of working with thoughts and emotions is highlighted in many different ways in the teachings. Some texts describe the mind as tumbling like a waterfall. And there's a verse in the Dhammapada, which is a collection of Buddhist verses. As you listen to this—this was said 2,600 years ago—see if it still resonates with you today. This is one of the verses: "The active mind is difficult to tame, flighty and wandering wherever it will. Taming it is essential, leading to the joy of well-being."

Does anyone notice their flighty mind wandering where it will? I love this because it just points to the universality of these teachings. What was true 2,600 years ago is still true of our minds today. And we know this from our own experience, particularly in meditation. I'm sure you've noticed how the mind can hop on a train of association. A thought arises, we hop on this train of association, we don't know that we've hopped on the train, and we have no idea even where the train is going. Then sometime later, we wake up from being lost in the thought and find ourselves in a completely different inner terrain.

So the question then is, how do we work with thoughts in our practice? This very pervasive aspect of our minds. Again, here's another verse from the Dhammapada: "Just as a fletcher"—and in case you don't know what a fletcher is, it's someone who makes arrows—"just as an arrow maker shapes an arrow, so the wise develop the mind, so excitable, uncertain, and difficult to control."

That's really what we're all doing here. With quickly passing thoughts, all we really need to do is simply be aware that they pass through the mind. Now, this is simple, but not easy. There was a very renowned Tibetan master of the last century, Dudjom

Rinpoche, and he talked about the phenomenon in the mind of the subtle undercurrent of thoughts—those very light thoughts, almost like a constant stream, or perhaps not quite constant but very frequently occurring, very light, that mostly go unnoticed. Dudjom Rinpoche called this undercurrent of thought "the thieves of meditation." Because we don't really know they're there, and yet when we're lost in them, we're not being mindful, we're not being present. It's as if we're asleep.

An interesting exercise, which I've practiced myself and found very illuminating as a way of beginning to attune ourselves to this undercurrent of thoughts, to catching the thieves of meditation: you might, as an exercise, set the intention to watch for these very light passing thoughts. Set the intention perhaps for five or ten minutes at a time, several times a day. It could be in the sitting, it could be walking meditation, it could be simply walking about. Set the intention: "Okay, the next five minutes, I'm going to really watch for these very light thoughts that are passing through." I found this exercise to be extremely illuminating, first because it showed me how frequent they were—much more frequent than I had imagined.

And it also showed me that in those moments—even if it was a short time, five seconds, ten seconds—when we're actually lost in that thought, we're in delusion. We're thinking, but we don't know that we're thinking. And then we wake up from being lost and we come back into awareness, we come back into wisdom. So in doing this exercise, we really begin to see quite clearly the movement of the mind between delusion and wisdom, between being asleep and being awake.

Have you ever had the experience of waking up in the morning—I don't know, maybe this doesn't happen on retreat, but perhaps at home—you wake up and then maybe drift off back to sleep for a minute or two, enter into a dream state, and then you wake up again and you're really awake? Well, my experience in doing this exercise was that every time I got lost in one of these quickly passing thoughts, it was just like dropping off into sleep again, into a dream, and then waking up.

And then further I looked, and I saw that a lot of these thoughts really revolved around some sense of self. Maybe it was a plan, a memory, something I needed to do—somehow revolving around an "I," a sense of "I." And so I started reminding myself: Joseph, stop dreaming yourself into existence. Because that's what was happening in each of these moments of being caught by the thieves of meditation.

I would encourage you to play with this, because first, it really sharpens our mindfulness. It takes interest and diligence to see this clearly. And it reveals so much about the nature of awareness—or its absence.

With longer chains of thought, we can strengthen our awareness of them with another meditative exercise. When you've been lost in a thought for some time and then you awaken from being lost, just take a moment to acknowledge when in that thought process you became aware of it. Very often we become aware of a thought after it's over—we remember, "Oh, I was lost in a thought." Sometimes we become aware of it in the middle. Sometimes, when the mind is really clear and mindful, we can be aware of the thought just as it's arising. And sometimes—this takes a lot of clarity—sometimes we can even pick up the intention to think.

Again, it's not to judge ourselves for when we're picking it up, but simply to acknowledge or to undertake the exercise of recognizing when we do. Because that strengthens our habit of being mindful of thought as an object.

Another helpful attitude with respect to thought was expressed by Suzuki Roshi, who, as most of you probably know, is the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. In a wonderful book called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, he had this very simple suggestion. He said, "Don't be bothered by your thoughts. Let them come and let them go."

But unfortunately, we often are bothered by our thoughts. So as we're working with refining our ability to be mindful of the thinking process, a very important point here is not to add an attitude of judgment about them, or aversion, or resistance to the fact that we're thinking. We simply want to be aware. When we come out from being lost, we want to be aware that we were lost in the thought—without judgment—and actually take delight in the fact of now being aware.

All those times when you're carried away by a thought and then we wake up, and then "Oh," you know, we berate ourselves—"Lost again"—instead of that, when we wake up from being lost in thought, how about delighting in the moment of awareness, delighting in the moment of wakefulness? For as many times as you get lost, that many times do you awaken. It leads to a much happier meditation if we delight in the awakening rather than judge ourselves for having been lost. So it's right in that moment of transition that we can really change our attitude about thinking.

In working with the longer patterns of thought that will often arise, it's helpful to understand a broader meaning of mindfulness. Now, the Pāli word for mindfulness, as many of you know, is *sati*. And the root meaning of this Pāli word is "to remember." So what is *sati*? What is the remembering?

First—and this is the piece that's often not attended to, we don't recognize it as being part of mindfulness—*sati* or remembering in its first aspect is to call to mind, or remembering, what is skillful and what is unskillful, what is wholesome and what is un-

wholesome. So we're calling to mind that discernment. And the second meaning is remembering the present moment. That's, I think, what we're most familiar with when we think of mindfulness: be in the present moment, be awake to it.

It's really important, though, to begin to exercise the understanding of that first meaning, which in meditation I think we don't often do. We don't take the time to just acknowledge with these different thought patterns: "Oh, is this a wholesome one? Is this an unwholesome one?"

Now, the problem of being aware of thoughts is that these objects, as you know, are very slippery. They just slide into the mind so unobtrusively—very unlike a sound or a bodily sensation, where the impact of that contact is very noticeable. The impact of the contact of a thought is so subtle that mostly we're not aware of it, and so they just slide in, easily being unnoticed. And that's why they're called the thieves of meditation.

And before we know it, we're carried away in a whole train of mental proliferation.

What's important to understand and acknowledge is that it's not the thought that is the problem. It's our not being aware that we're thinking that's the problem. So meditation doesn't mean to stop thinking, as perhaps some people have that idea. Even though as concentration increases, sometimes the thought process does slow down and perhaps even stops for a while, our practice is honing our ability to be aware when the thought is there, rather than holding some idea that meditation means we're supposed to be stopping our thoughts.

Mindfulness in both of these aspects—remembering the present moment experience and also calling to mind what is skillful or unskillful—serves as a protection for the mind, because this discernment guards us from getting lost in the hindrances, getting lost in the defilements. Without mindfulness, without mindfulness of thought, we simply act out all the habit patterns of our conditioning. Some of them may be skillful, some unskillful, but there's no agency in terms of making the choice of which to cultivate and which to let go of. So mindfulness plays this very critical role in how we're living our lives—in cultivating those aspects of our minds that lead to happiness and letting go of those that lead to more suffering.

Ajahn Sumedho, the American monk who is the senior Western monk in Ajahn Chah's Thai forest tradition, had a very useful reminder about our practice. He said, "Our practice is not to follow the heart, but to train the heart." Sometimes we hear, "Oh, just follow your heart and everything will be fine." Well, for those of you who are experienced meditators and for those who may be new to the practice, I'm sure even after these first few days you've seen that not everything in your heart is beautiful and won-

derful and skillful. Maybe a lot is, but we have many habit patterns—some wholesome, some unwholesome. So it's not just following our heart; it's training our heart in the skillful, training our heart in the wholesome.

There's one discourse where the Buddha talks about his life before he became a Buddha, when he was referred to as the Bodhisattva, the being working towards Buddhahood. At this time he had renounced the home life and was off practicing for about six years before his awakening. He talked about one of the exercises he did as a Bodhisattva, as he was training. He said that as different thoughts arose, he would divide them into two classes: the unwholesome ones, rooted in greed and hatred and delusion; and the wholesome ones, those thoughts rooted in non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or mettā, loving-kindness, and non-delusion or wisdom. So he practiced discerning, as these thoughts arose, which category they fell into.

Now, I'm not suggesting you do this all the time or overburden your mind with trying to figure out whether each thought is wholesome or unwholesome. But it might be interesting to do it at times—perhaps take five minutes or ten minutes where you try to apply that discernment, just to become familiar with the difference between these two classes of thoughts. Another way of doing it would be to pay attention when a wholesome or unwholesome thought is so obvious that you don't even have to think about it, but you take the time to acknowledge, "Oh, this is an unwholesome thought," or "This is a wholesome one." Just becoming familiar with that discernment can be of tremendous benefit, not only in meditation but in all of life.

The reason this is so vitally important—in whatever way you end up doing it, and you can play with it and explore for yourself how to discern the difference—is highlighted in one statement the Buddha made. He said, "Whatever we frequently think about and ponder, that will become the inclination of our minds." Whatever we frequently think about and ponder, that becomes the inclination of our minds.

This is a tremendously important teaching, because frequent repetition of certain thought or emotional patterns, with each repetition, strengthens those neural pathways in the brain, so that those same thoughts and emotions are more likely to occur. That's what the Buddha meant when he said it becomes the inclination of our minds. When it becomes the inclination of our minds, that then leads to habitual actions in our lives. And each of these actions brings about its respective karmic results. So creating agency in the unfolding of our lives has to do with understanding that our actions bring results: wholesome actions bring about happiness, unwholesome actions bring about suf-

fering of one kind or another, and the actions are prompted by our thoughts and emotions. This part of our meditation, this part of our practice, really has a tremendously powerful transformative effect on how we're living.

The Buddha then makes an interesting distinction between how we should be mindful when wholesome thoughts are present and how we should be mindful when unwholesome thoughts are present—two different attitudes with regard to these different classes of thoughts. In the case of unwholesome thoughts, where maybe it's thoughts of greed or aversion, anger, hatred, or just confusion and delusion, the Buddha says we need to have a very active heedfulness and diligence. We need to actively engage mindfulness so we don't stray into these unwholesome patterns. The Buddha used an example—you have to remember that he was living in an agrarian society—he used the example of a cowherd tending to his cows. With unwholesome thoughts, he likened it to

needing to be on guard with the cows when the crops were still in the field, so the cows didn't stray into the field and destroy the crops. Can you get the picture? Field, cows, crops. You have to be careful that they're not going in and trampling on the crops. That's the kind of attentiveness we need with unwholesome thoughts, lest they proliferate.

There's one reflection that I found very powerful in practicing this kind of vigilance, just as a reminder of why it's important to do so. Again, this is from the Buddha's teachings. He said, "These thoughts rooted in desire or ill will or cruelty lead to affliction and difficulty for myself and others and lead away from wisdom and awakening."

I appreciate this reflection because sometimes we might be aware of these unwholesome thoughts and not realize the impact they're actually having on our minds and our lives. They are conditioning our mind. They're strengthening that pattern. The Buddha is simply reminding us to pay attention to this, to remind ourselves that these kinds of thoughts lead to affliction and difficulty for oneself, for others. They lead away from wisdom, away from awakening.

This kind of reflection from time to time can actually give us a lot of energy and inspiration to pay attention to the quality of our thoughts, not to dismiss them as being non-impactful or unimportant. We can use this reflection, or something like it, as a powerful reminder helping us to disengage from being identified with those thoughts rooted in unwholesome tendencies.

But sometimes the reflection is not enough. Sometimes the pattern is just too strong. I want to give you an example. This goes back many years in my practice—thirty, forty years—to a time when I was having lots of sexual fantasies. They were really pleasant.

They were very seductive. And my mind was getting caught again and again. I recognized that this was just desire in the mind, greed in the mind. I would be noting "desire, desire, desire," but it didn't work. I was still getting caught over and over again.

At a certain point, I took my mind in hand and said, "Joseph, enough." It was like the sword of Manjushri. Sometimes we try the more subtle, meditative, reflective approaches, but sometimes we really need to call up our energy in a very direct and active way. "No, this is unwholesome. Enough." And that actually worked. It broke through the seductive power of those fantasies.

Now, the key here—and this is really important—is that the "enough" has to be coming from the strength of wisdom, not from aversion. Because if we're doing it with aversion, we're just adding another unwholesome mind state to the mix. But it is powerful to be strong and have a strong response from a place of wisdom.

So this is how to work with the unskillful, unwholesome thoughts. With wholesome thoughts, wholesome states of mind, mindfulness takes a very different form. The Buddha continued with the example of the cowherd. He said that when the crops are safely harvested, the cowherd can simply rest comfortably under a tree, simply knowing the cows are there.

I love that image. When the mind is in a wholesome state, when there are wholesome thoughts or wholesome states of mind, we don't need that kind of active vigilance. We don't have to be on guard. Rather, we can settle back, relax, be at ease, simply knowing, simply being mindful that this wholesome state of mind is present. Metta is present. Calm is present. Energy is present.

We begin to see the nuances of the application of mindfulness, how it adjusts to the particular experience that's arising in the moment. In practicing this discernment between different kinds of thoughts, it's also really helpful and important to watch our attitude about the simple fact that we're thinking.

Because for many meditators, we are conscious—or often not conscious—of an underlying attitude about having thoughts arise at all.

I want to read something from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a Burmese meditation master who is very skillful in his approach to the proper attitude in watching the mind. Here is what he said:

"When the mind is thinking or wandering, just be aware of it. Thinking is a natural activity of the mind. You are doing well if you are aware that the mind is thinking. But if you feel disturbed by thoughts, or if you have a reaction or judgment of them, there is

a problem with your attitude. The wandering mind is not the problem. The attitude that it should not be around is the problem. When you feel disturbed by the thinking mind, remind yourself that you are not practicing to prevent thinking, but rather to recognize and acknowledge thinking when it arises."

I hope this instruction got through, because we don't want to be judging the thinking mind. We simply want to be aware of it.

So far we've been discussing thoughts on the relative level—that is, how we relate to the specific content of thoughts. It's also possible, and extremely interesting, to be mindful of thought on the more ultimate level, the level of emptiness. Here we become mindful of the nature of thought itself.

Another Tibetan teacher who teaches extensively in the West these days said, "Recognizing a thought is not the same thing as recognizing its nature." Do you see the difference? Recognizing the fact that we're thinking—that's the important foundation. But that's not the same as recognizing, not the content of the thought, but the very nature of thought itself.

One exercise I've done frequently is incredibly illuminating about our lives when thoughts are proliferating. From time to time, as thoughts are happening, as they're arising in the mind, explore this more ultimate nature by simply asking the question: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is the thought as a phenomenon?

If a thought is present in the mind and we're asking this question, we're able to look very directly—okay, this thought is here, what is the thought? What's so fascinating is that when we look at thought in this way, we see it's little more than nothing. It's like a tiny energy blip arising in the mind. There's hardly anything there.

And yet—this is the great paradox, or perhaps we would simply call it the situation—when we look at the nature of thought, we see it's hardly anything at all. Yet when we're unaware that we're thinking, these very same thoughts have tremendous power in our lives. They're like little dictators in the mind. Thoughts arise: go here, go there, do this, do that. We create our whole lives driven by the kinds of thoughts we have. And yet, when we look at the very nature of thought, it's really empty. It's so ephemeral.

We can see this for ourselves. This is not some teaching we've heard and must simply accept. We can see it directly in each moment when we look: What is a thought?

I would suggest investigating this from time to time because it can be so freeing, especially when we remember this understanding during moments when we're caught up in some problematic thought process. If we can drop down to the more ultimate level and see thought's essentially empty, ephemeral nature, it loses its power to dominate our lives.

As we practice being mindful of thought in all these ways, on both the relative and more ultimate levels, we begin to develop a facility for using the thought process skillfully. Thought can be a powerful tool, a powerful vehicle for understanding if we use it wisely.

As we become more mindful of the thinking process, we can actually direct it in different ways. Thoughts can become a vehicle for wise reflection—what I call our inner Dharma coach. Sometimes, after hearing many teachings and reflecting on your own experience, different phrases may come to mind, reminding you of some Dharma principle appropriate to the situation. When I was working with all that desire, I saw that my usual method wasn't working, so I reflected: okay, enough—time to use the sword of wisdom.

There are many, many aspects of this Dharma coach that keep guiding us in our practice. For example, if you're sitting and feel yourself getting more and more tense for whatever reason, perhaps the Dharma coach will come in with a reminder: it's time to relax, settle back, and be more at ease. Or if the mind is wandering considerably, perhaps the Dharma coach says: bring the attention in closer. These are all thoughts used skillfully, wise reflections about Dharma practice.

Mindfulness of thoughts can also lead us very directly into being mindful of emotions.

Emotions are a whole other big arena of practice, because as we know, emotions are a very complex phenomenon. It's not just a simple experience. Emotions involve thoughts. They involve bodily sensations, bodily energy. They involve different mental affects. And what's interesting is that with different people, there's a wide range in our abilities to know what we're feeling. For some, it's quite difficult. We might be going on in our lives not even recognizing that there's some underlying emotion driving our actions because we haven't trained ourselves to really be aware and mindful of our emotions. For others, maybe that sensitivity is already there—we already know what we're feeling—but if we're not practiced in being mindful of them, then it's easy to get lost and overwhelmed in the flood tide of these feelings.

So there are different ways we can train ourselves to connect with emotions in general, and more specifically, with the afflictive emotions that cause suffering to ourselves and suffering to others. One very interesting aspect of our meditation practice, as we begin to strengthen and develop mindfulness of these mental activities—thoughts and emotions—is observing how a particular thought or image may immediately trigger an emotion to arise. I've watched this in my own mind and been amazed at this process.

For example, we may think of someone who's hurt us in one way or another. Just as we start thinking of this person, immediately anger might arise, or resentment might arise. All that happened was a thought arose in the mind, but if we're not really mindful in that moment, that thought can immediately trigger an emotional response. Or we think of somebody we love, and immediately there may be a really warm-hearted feeling, an open-hearted feeling. Or we may think of someone that we're really strongly attracted to, and immediately desire or lust may arise.

What's so interesting to me is that all of this can be happening simply sitting and walking or going through the day, without any contact at all with the person. The person may not even be there, and yet the thought of the person is enough to trigger any one of a wide range of emotional reactions.

There's one teaching which sometimes people find challenging, but I find inspiring. And that is the understanding that we are one hundred percent responsible for our minds. We are responsible for what our minds are doing. No one else could be responsible for that. So whatever external situation may be present, when something is arising in the mind—and this may happen when the person is there, but very often the person is not even there—we are responsible for what's arising. To see this connection between thought and emotion is a powerful way of seeing the conditioned nature of emotion.

It's helpful to begin noticing these trigger thoughts for different emotions so that we can become more aware of the emotion itself and also of its impersonal, conditioned nature.

I'll give you another example. This goes back quite a few years. I was living at home, right next to the Insight Meditation Society, and there was a board meeting scheduled for that afternoon. At that time—and this goes back many years—there was a lot of conflict on the board. I was taking a walk before the meeting, and as different thoughts arose in my mind about the meeting, the thought would arise and immediately I would feel some anxiety: "Oh, what's it going to be like? A lot of tension, a lot of conflict." But I noticed this happening—the thought arose, anxiety arose. I became so interested in it

that I just started playing with it, intentionally thinking about the meeting to watch the anxiety arise. I wanted to see how impersonal it was. It was an impersonal process of one thing conditioning another.

When we don't catch these trigger thoughts and find ourselves already enmeshed in the emotion, there are other signals that can remind us to investigate what emotion is present. This could be in formal meditation practice or just in the course of our daily lives. When we're feeling unhappy in some way, just out of sorts, ill at ease, or when there are a lot of obsessive thoughts happening in the mind—all of these experiences can be feedback that some underlying emotion is present. Maybe it's unacknowledged worry, or anxiety, or fear, or aversion, or shame. When we're feeling out of sorts, that can become a signal to actually investigate: "Is there an emotion present that I have not been aware of that's causing this feeling?"

When we're not mindful of these underlying emotions, they become an unconscious filter on how we experience the world. So it becomes really important to gain greater and greater clarity about the emotional underpinnings—often conditioned by thoughts—of our actions in the world and of how we're feeling. Sometimes we don't recognize the emotion that's there because we're misperceiving it.

I was sitting and I was feeling something that I thought was sadness. So I just kept noting "sad, sad, sad"—but it still felt stuck. There was no movement, no connection.

So I just kept looking, looking more carefully. And at a certain point I realized it was unhappiness. It wasn't sadness. Now, these two are related, but they're not the same. And as soon as I saw it was unhappiness, that's when I was in alignment with what was actually there. And in the alignment, there was acceptance. That made it a lot easier to be with it.

Sometimes if we're not sure what the emotion is, we can simply settle back and ask the question, "Well, what's happening now? Just what's happening?" Sometimes that very question opens us up to intuitively recognize—oh, it's sadness, or it's unhappiness, or it's joy, whatever it may be. Or sometimes it's just confusion, and we can note confusion.

This acceptance of what's there does not mean that we're justifying the emotion or wallowing in it or judging it. It's the simple acknowledgment that a particular mind state is present.

There's one form of feedback that is hugely helpful in indicating when we're not being accepting of whatever the experience may be—and that feedback is when we're experiencing some sense of struggle. In meditation, whenever we feel that sense of

struggle, it means just one thing: something is arising in the mind, in the body, in the world around us that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

So instead of just being caught up and lost in the struggle, if we take it as feedback—"Oh, something's going on here that I'm not accepting"—then we can settle back and open up. What is it? Is it uncomfortable sensation in the body? Is it a painful emotion?

Sometimes it's difficult to accept what's happening because an emotion might be just too painful to accept. This happens especially for people with some kind of trauma in their background. As we go into our practice and begin to open up to different layers and levels of our experience, sometimes things arise that are really painful to be with. There's a tendency not to want to engage.

In these situations, it's really important to proceed very slowly and very gently—at first, touching it briefly, then just gradually opening to it and stepping back, opening and stepping back, until gradually we expand our capacity to be with these painful feelings. It's not about rushing into them.

From this foundation of clear recognition and acceptance, mindfulness can then discover which emotions are skillful and which are not—just as with thoughts. There are some emotions which, in Buddhist terminology, are called afflictive emotions. They're afflictive in the sense that they cause us suffering. And there are some emotions which are the cause of happiness. So just as with thoughts, we want to discern the difference so we can cultivate the wholesome and learn to let go of that which is unskillful.

The last step in working with emotions—and this is perhaps the most challenging, but also the most liberating—is that we need to learn how to open to the emotions that we're feeling, to really open to them and feel them, and at the same time, not be identified with them.

This is very tricky. Feeling the joy, feeling the happiness, feeling the anger, feeling the despair—whatever it is, feeling it—and being mindful enough so that we're not identifying with it as being "I" or "mine." This is what turns our emotional world into wisdom.

What does identification with emotions mean? It's when we're lost in the emotional energy of the story, carried away by it, taking the emotion to be self, to be "I," to be "mine." Emotions very often are what we most personalize in our experience, and that's why it's such an important arena of practice.

We want to see the difference between "I'm sad," "I'm angry," "I'm happy," "I'm this or that"—and the understanding that sadness feels like this, happiness feels like this. "This is sadness. This is happiness. This is joy"—where we're not adding the "I" and "mine" to the experience.

There's much greater ease and freedom in our lives when we understand emotions not as who we are, but as experiences arising out of momentary conditions—and disappearing as the conditions change.

There's just one image I'll leave you with in terms of understanding the impersonality of emotions—a kind of metaphor.

Clouds that wander in the sky have no roots, no home. Just picture clouds in the sky—no roots, no home. Emotions are like that. They arise when the conditions are present, like clouds in the sky arising when the conditions are right. And then conditions change, the clouds disappear, the emotions disappear.

Now just think for a moment—conjure up the image of clouds being rooted to the earth, a root coming down from the cloud to the ground. Pretty ridiculous. Clouds don't have roots. Well, one of the things we discover in our meditation is that emotions also, even though they are what we most often personalize, are actually impersonal. They arise out of certain conditions. Conditions change, and the emotions change.

This does not mean distancing ourselves from emotions. We can open to them and experience them fully. So it's not becoming emotionally detached. We're feeling them fully and not identifying with them. This is one of the subtleties and deepening aspects of our practice, and one that is very liberating.

All of these practices that I've mentioned open up possibilities of a much deeper happiness in our lives. When we engage with thoughts and emotions from a place of interest, a place of inquiry, a place of wisdom, we can let them all arise and pass away in this vast open sky of our hearts and minds. This is part of our practice, and a very essential part, because these two domains of thought and emotion are such an important part of our lives.

Let's just sit for a couple of minutes. Let all the words vanish. Settling into the awareness of the present moment with ease, with relaxation, just opening to whatever is present.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes and re-engage with the world around you.

CHAPTER 18

# Bodhicitta: Compassion and Emptiness

Joseph Goldstein · 1h06

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein illuminates bodhicitta, the deep aspiration to awaken from ignorance in order to benefit all beings. Drawing from both Tibetan and Theravāda sources, he explains how bodhicitta operates on two levels: relative bodhicitta as compassion, and ultimate bodhicitta as emptiness of self. Goldstein emphasizes that the true value of our actions lies not merely in their outcomes but in the motivation behind them—the seeds we plant within ourselves with each deed.*
>
> *The talk explores practical challenges in cultivating compassion, acknowledging our tendency toward indifference and withdrawal when confronted with suffering. Goldstein shares powerful examples ranging from Dr. Tenzin Choedrak's survival of 17 years of torture with an open heart, to the 'butterfly effect' of small acts of kindness, illustrating how even modest gestures can transform countless lives. He references teachings from the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Mahārāji, alongside stories of contemporary figures like Dr. Paul Farmer, demonstrating that compassion is indeed a verb requiring action.*
>
> *Most significantly, Goldstein reveals the profound insight that compassion and emptiness are not separate practices but are intimately united—compassion is the activity of emptiness. When we recognize the selfless nature of phenomena, compassionate responsiveness arises uncontrived and effortless. This understanding, drawn from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teachings, offers practitioners a powerful motivation: the freer we become from self-reference, the more naturally compassion flows. The talk concludes with guidance on breathing meditation at the heart center, inviting practitioners to embody these qualities in daily life.*

From one perspective, we can say that a far-reaching aspect of our practice comes down to the awareness and purification of our motivation. In Western culture, we often measure the success of our actions only by their results. But the Dalai Lama suggested a different standard, saying that the true value of an action is measured not only by its success or failure, but also by the motivation behind it. Because it's the motivation behind our actions that most completely conditions our own hearts and minds. So what seeds are we planting within ourselves with each action that we take? It's clear that we can't always control the outcome of our actions, but we do have the power to train our own hearts.

Within the Buddha's teachings, there is one motivation that is so skillful and so ennobling of our lives that it can become the reference point for our entire life's journey. And this motivation is called bodhicitta, translated as the heart-mind of wisdom. What it means is the deep aspiration to awaken from the habits of ignorance in order to benefit all beings. Although our practice will inevitably help everyone else, including this aspiration in our very motivation to practice can really bring a very rich and heartfelt energy to everything we do.

I'd just like to read a couple of things expressing this aspiration of bodhicitta. This is from the Dalai Lama: "Speaking of my own experience, I sometimes wonder why a lot of people like me. When I think about it, I cannot find in myself any specially good quality except for one small thing. That is the kind heart, which I try to explain to others and which I do my best to develop myself. Of course, there are moments when I do get angry, but in the depth of my heart, I do not hold a grudge against anyone. I cannot pretend that I am able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is."

So we may have a different assessment of the Dalai Lama's capacity to practice it, but he is expressing just the supreme value of cultivating this quality of the kind heart, or the wish to awaken for the benefit of all.

And from the Pali Canon, the Buddha's teaching—this was his exhortation to the first sixty monks who had become fully enlightened, who had become Arhants. This was his directive. He said, "Go forth, O Bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and happiness of people and devas. Let not two go by one way. Teach the Dhamma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. Proclaim the noble life altogether perfect and pure. Work for the good of others, you who have done your duty."

So tonight, I'd like to speak about bodhicitta. In classical teachings, we can understand the meaning and practice of bodhicitta on two levels. On the relative level, bodhicitta means compassion. And on the more ultimate level, bodhicitta refers to emptiness or emptiness of self. It is said that when these two are present—the relative and the more ultimate level, compassion and emptiness—when these two are present, enlightenment is unavoidable.

Given this guarantee of enlightenment, it seems worthwhile to explore both of these aspects of bodhicitta: the relative aspect of compassion, the more ultimate level of emptiness, how we can actually apply them and practice them in our lives, and how the two levels relate to one another.

Relative bodhicitta, or compassion, manifests in the world of beings, of separate individuals. Compassion is that feeling and wish to alleviate the suffering of beings in whatever way we can. Compassion opens our hearts to the suffering that is there and overcomes the tendency we may have of indifference or apathy or inaction. It's the feeling of compassion that actually moves us to act. But as the Dalai Lama said, compassion and love are precious things in life. They are not complicated.

They are simple, but difficult to practice.

I found that quite interesting—why such beautiful and ennobling qualities are so difficult to practice. That's one of the things I'd like to address today.

Compassion arises out of our willingness to come close to suffering, both in ourselves and in others. The problem is that even though we may want to be compassionate, and perhaps very often are, it's not always easy to open to the suffering that is present. Just as there are many times in our own lives when we don't want to acknowledge or open to the suffering in ourselves, to our own pain, we don't always want to open to the pain of others. There are strong tendencies within us, strong tendencies in the mind, that in the face of suffering, in the face of pain, can keep us defended or withdrawn or indifferent or apathetic. And this indifference is the often unacknowledged barrier to a compassionate response.

As an experiment, watch your mind and your reactions the next time you approach a situation of suffering. It might be some pain in the body, some painful emotion—feelings of discontent, fear, unworthiness, jealousy, loneliness. It might be an interaction with a difficult person, or it might be a situation of suffering in the world: natural disasters, political or religious violence, racial injustice and oppression. What happens when we face these situations, either in person or through the vivid image of the media? It would be helpful to watch our own reactions as we come in close contact with all of these different situations of suffering that confront us. What happens when we face them? Do we feel uneasy? Do we withdraw? Do we turn away? Do we let them in?

I'd like to share a story that was told by a friend of mine quite a few years ago. He was telling the story of his grandfather and his father driving in a car on December 7th, 1941—Pearl Harbor Day. They're driving in the car, listening to the radio, and the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor comes on. The first thing his grandfather says to his father is, "Don't tell your mother."

World War II would be a hard situation to keep out. And yet I like that story because it reflects some deep tendency we may have to avoid suffering, not to come close to it, not to be willing to open to it.

I could see all of these different tendencies at play in the commitment that we undertook, starting many years ago, to train ourselves in undoing racism as it manifests in our society, as it was manifesting in our institutions, in the centers, in our own personal lives. For me, one of the most striking aspects of engaging this work was seeing how easy it was, as a white person in this society, to have the awareness of racial injustice—among many other kinds of injustices—and to see how easy it was for that awareness to slip onto the back burner of our consciousness. If something doesn't touch us personally and with immediacy, it can be so easy to ignore.

It's not enough to admire the qualities of love and compassion from afar, or as simply being a meditative exercise somehow removed from our daily lives. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, compassion is a verb—meaning it implies that we take action in the face of awareness of suffering.

The question for all of us is how to keep our hearts open, given the magnitude of suffering that exists in the world. Is it even possible to keep our hearts open, given the immensity and extent of the suffering that is there?

This challenge is not a theoretical one. Our practice is about the transformation of our consciousness that increasingly makes compassionate responsiveness the default setting of our lives. That's really the challenge for us as we undertake this practice.

Compassion requires openness. It requires interest. It requires equanimity. It's learning to let things in, letting in the experiences of suffering without drowning in the difficulties, without being overcome by sorrow. It's really learning how to be with the truth of things just as they are.

This is the great gift of mindfulness to compassion. It's what we're doing every time in our practice when we can open to our own pain and difficulties—pain in the body, difficult emotions, some interpersonal difficulty. Can we be mindful? And mindfulness in this context means letting it in, letting it in without reactivity, without defensiveness. As we practice opening and coming close to the suffering in ourselves, we then have greater strength and courage to be with the suffering of others.

I'd like to read something from a Zen teacher named Lou Richmond. Quite a few years ago, he suffered from a very serious disease, viral encephalitis, which is a devastating and often fatal illness. He was in a coma for two weeks with brain damage and other disabilities, and it took three or four years to heal. After he recovered, this is what he wrote about his understanding of some fundamental aspects of the Buddhist teachings:

"Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddhist teaching, I say this: everything is connected, nothing lasts, you are not alone."

This is really just a restatement of the traditional three marks of existence: non-self, impermanence, and suffering.

I don't think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as "you are not alone" before my illness. But now I find that talking about it that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer means we are all in the same boat, and that's what allows us to feel compassion.

I found that very inspiring because it reminds us that we can relate our own experience of suffering and feel compassion for that same suffering as it manifests in others.

The beginning of compassion is empathy. This happens when we take a moment to stop and feel what is going on with another person, another being, or with ourselves, before rushing on with our lives. This stopping is its own practice, because many times we may be cognizant of another's pain but don't really take the time, even for a few moments, to truly open to it, to understand it in ourselves. Empathy is the heart-mind of inclusion. It takes others in.

This was expressed beautifully by the Zen master poet Hermit Ryokan, who lived at the end of the eighteenth century. For those of you who may know about Ryokan, he was this amazing and beautiful monk who lived in the mountains of Japan, very poor, with almost no possessions at all. He would just wander around, often playing with the village children. There's a book of his poetry that beautifully expresses his humanity.

This was one of his short little poems, and it really expresses this feeling of empathy, this feeling of inclusion. He wrote: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world." I love that image. Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world—as an expression of that care and compassion for all beings.

With a touch of humor, he also described the same feeling of compassion for inanimate objects. He wrote: "I've forgotten my begging bowl, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl." You can just imagine—he had this old beat-up begging bowl, forgot it, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl. It's such a warm, heartful expression of care for all beings, all things.

We can practice developing empathy in all different kinds of situations. It might be opening to the difficulties and suffering of someone very close to us, or it might be opening to the difficulties and suffering of different situations in the world. In these

very polarized times, when we're with people we find difficult, it might be helpful to ask the question: Why do others feel the way they do? Rather than hold on just to our own reactivity.

There was a sixteenth-century Zen master called Bankei who wrote a wonderful book called *The Unborn*. There's one line in the book that really jumped out at me, which I've tried to remember in my interactions, particularly in situations of conflict. What he wrote was: "Don't side with yourself."

That's a good reminder, because mostly we go through our lives very much siding with ourselves. We're not always open to really hear, to really listen to other points of view, to feel empathy for people we might find difficult, who hold very different views.

Sometimes there are situations where people really are behaving badly and causing a great deal of harm, either to ourselves or to others. Then it becomes interesting to watch what our own reaction or response is to that. Do we get angry as we're seeing people do really harmful things? Do we judge how they are, perhaps feeling almost a kind of self-righteousness in our anger? But is it possible to stop and feel what is going on in a larger context of understanding, even in very extreme circumstances?

I want to talk a little about Dr. Tenzin Choedrak, who was the personal physician to the Dalai Lama. He was imprisoned and tortured by the Chinese government for seventeen years. When he was finally released and came to live in India with His Holiness, describing what he went through, he shared what made it possible for him to survive—not only physically in that extreme situation, but also with a heart that remained open and compassionate, not closing down in fear and hatred. It's a pretty extraordinary accomplishment.

These are a few of the things he said. He said he saw his tormentors, his enemies, as human beings like himself—that his guards were people who were also in adverse situations, conditions, creating the unwholesome karma for themselves that would result in their own future intense suffering. He never forgot the commonality of our human condition, understanding that all of our actions have consequences, have karmic consequences, bringing their own karmic results.

What's so interesting is that Dr. Choedrak held this understanding not as a vehicle of revenge—"Oh, with karma, they'll get theirs"—but rather as a vehicle of compassion. It is possible to reframe or enlarge the context of our understanding of what's going on. This is how we begin to open to the possibility of keeping our heart open—hopefully not in such intense situations as he described, but even in the more ordinary challenging circumstances of our lives.

It's important to understand also that when it's possible, we do need to take appropriate actions when people are doing harmful things. It is possible for us to set appropriate boundaries, to redress injustices.

Compassion doesn't mean that we don't respond in an effective way to the causes of suffering in our lives. But again, what's happening in our own hearts as we do that? Can we keep that sense of openness?

I'm sure most of you know of Ram Dass and his guru Neem Karoli Baba, often called Maharaji. Much of his teaching was about love—the book of his teachings was called *The Miracle of Love*. And he had a very pointed instruction in how to blend effective action with maintaining that feeling of open-hearted compassion. He said, "Do what needs to be done, but don't throw anyone out of your heart."

It's such a pithy expression of what we can strive for. Even as we're engaged in responding to the suffering in the world, can we practice—and it is practice; we're not going to be perfect in this—can we practice doing what needs to be done without throwing anyone out of our hearts? The great lesson here is that how we respond is up to us. Nobody is making us respond in a particular way. This is where we have agency in our lives.

Empathy brings us close to suffering—that willingness to come close. Compassion takes us a step further. It's not only feeling what others are going through; it's also being motivated to act on those feelings. As compassion grows within us, as we develop that capacity, we begin to actively engage with the suffering in the world, responding to the various needs of beings in whatever way is appropriate, in whatever way is possible. Sometimes it may be in very small, unregarded ways—maybe just a small gesture of friendliness, or forgiveness, or generosity. Really simple things.

Again from the Dalai Lama: "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend. This gives me a genuine feeling of happiness. It is the practice of compassion." Imagine for a moment if we really undertook this as a practice—trying to treat everyone we meet as an old friend. What a beautiful way to go through life.

We shouldn't overlook these opportunities or underestimate their effect. There is an understanding in science called chaos theory. I'm not a scientist, so this will be a very simple explanation. A technical description of chaos theory says "sensitive dependence on initial conditions." What that means is that a very small change in input in a system can often result in very large differences over time. Many of you are probably familiar with the famous example known as the butterfly effect: how a hurricane formation can

be contingent on a butterfly flapping its wings three weeks before. It's a very striking image—a butterfly flapping its wings sets in motion a series of cause and effect that several weeks later could result in a hurricane.

There's a powerful lesson in this for us. Some years ago I saw a film documentary called *A Small Act* which beautifully illustrates this principle. In the mid-1970s, a Swedish schoolteacher named Hilda Back was making a small monthly donation to help children from poor families in Kenya continue with their education. One of the recipients of her small monthly gift was a young boy named Chris Mburu. Because of that financial help, he was able to continue his education. He eventually went on to the University of Nairobi, then received a Fulbright scholarship to Harvard University, where he graduated in 1973 with a master's degree in international human rights. He went back to Kenya and eight years later set up his own foundation, helping very bright young students who were unable to continue their education due to poverty.

This is an amazing story. The butterfly flapping its wings—a small monthly donation from a schoolteacher in Sweden set in motion a series of cause and effect which resulted in the transformation of hundreds, maybe thousands of people's lives, opening up entirely new possibilities in their unfolding life experience.

We don't want to overlook or minimize the importance of these small acts of kindness, these small acts of compassion, because they often bring results that we have no idea of—how they will manifest, what magnitude can come from a butterfly flapping its wings. For me, this has become a strong motivation: remembering not to miss or pass on acting on these opportunities, these possibilities.

Sometimes compassion manifests as acts of great courage. There are so many examples of people motivated by far-ranging visions of justice, of peace, of freedom. Harriet Tubman during the Civil War, helping slaves escape through the Underground Railroad. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Gandhi—these are people who acted based on their compassionate concern for the suffering of others.

And we see it today with many young people really answering this urge to help. Many of you may know of the Pakistani young woman, Malala, who has become an advocate for women's rights and women's education in Pakistan. Or Greta Thunberg, who has done such remarkable work in trying to awaken us to the devastating consequences of climate change. These are young people who are acting out Thich Nhat Hanh's understanding that compassion is a verb. We have this feeling, this motivation to help, and then we actually do something.

Sometimes compassion, as I said, manifests in small, unregarded ways—a small monthly act of generosity. Sometimes it manifests in very courageous ways. And sometimes it just shows itself quite spontaneously in a single moment.

There are two stories that exemplify this. Many years ago, there was a man named Wesley Autrey, who became known as the subway hero. He was standing on a subway platform in New York when someone fell onto the tracks and a train was coming. In that moment, without hesitation, he jumped onto the tracks and laid down over her as the train passed over both of them. Extraordinary.

Afterward, there was a lot of press about this. This is what he said about that spontaneous act of compassion: "I don't feel like I did something spectacular. I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right. I do construction work in confined spaces a lot, so I looked and my judgment was pretty right. The train did have enough room for me." All of this unfolded in a split second, motivated by that spontaneous urge of compassion, the wish to help.

There's another example that has also really inspired me, and this is about Dr. Paul Farmer. He was a public health worker who did tremendous work with AIDS and TB and many other public health crises around the world. There's a wonderful book about his life called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. In it, there's a little anecdote about his having set up a clinic in Haiti. Lots of people would come to the clinic for help. At one point, he took off to walk for two days to help two families in a very remote village. Many of his colleagues questioned that decision. He spent all this time going off to help just these two families when so many people were coming to the clinic. They were overwhelmed by how many people needed care. Was that the right thing to do?

This was his response, and it really touches my heart: "If you say that a seven-hour walk is too long to walk for two families of patients, you're saying that their lives matter less than some others. And the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong in the world."

That is such a beautiful and poignant assessment of all that's wrong in the world—thinking that some people's lives matter less than others. In this practice of compassion, we begin to expand our capacity. The Brahma Viharas, as you probably know, are called the boundless states. Can we at least be working towards, practicing with the aspiration, that our compassion become as boundless as possible? Cultivating responsiveness to suffering, however it might manifest in our world.

The lesson from all of these examples is that we don't have to be saints or special beings to act with compassion. A small monthly donation ended up helping transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. There's no particular prescription for what we should do. There's no hierarchy of compassionate action, because the field of compassion is limitless.

It's the field of suffering beings. And we each find our own way. Depending on our interests, depending on our capabilities and capacities, there is no hierarchy where one kind of compassion is better than another. As I said, we each find the way that's appropriate for ourselves to develop and cultivate this quality.

It could take the form of active engagement with the suffering in the world. Or it could take the form of sitting in a mountain cave with the aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all. If you think of the Bodhisattva—the Buddha in his previous lives before awakening—there were countless past lives when he was living as a solitary monk, probably sitting in the forest or in a cave by himself, before the energy of his enlightened compassion could flower in the world.

I can just imagine his family during all those previous lives when he would go off and simply be by himself cultivating that quality. I can imagine them saying, "You're just wasting your time, you're just thinking about yourself." And yet 2,600 years later, we are still benefiting from the work that he did—his amazing awakened heart, awakened mind. So we don't want to take too narrow a slice of time to measure the value of our actions. And again, going back to what I said in the beginning, the value should really be measured by the quality of our motivation.

The Bodhisattva's aspiration and the Buddha's manifestation was not just to alleviate the suffering of a particular situation, but to understand the very root causes of suffering—the forces of greed, of hatred, of delusion in the mind, in our minds—and how to free ourselves from them. And as I said, thousands of years later, we are still benefiting from the power of his wisdom, from the power of his compassion. I find that so extraordinary.

So we need to walk on this path with a great deal of humility. Again, from His Holiness the Dalai Lama: "Changes in attitudes never come easily. The development of love and compassion is a wide, round curve that can be negotiated only slowly."

We need to be careful not to have unrealistic expectations when we begin our practice and get inspired by these possibilities, and then judge ourselves if we are not perfect in the manifestation of them—which we certainly will not be. We need the understanding that these changes of attitude never come easily, that the development of these qualities is a wide round curve that can be negotiated only slowly.

Another expression of realistic and appropriate humility comes from the Japanese poet Issa, who himself had endured so much suffering in his life. His haikus are wonderful—so full of humanity and warmth and compassion. This particular one I really love and find very appropriate:

*New Year's Day.*
*Everything's in blossom.*
*I feel about average.*

Yes, I feel about average. Can we acknowledge that and live in the space where we actually are, while still walking this path, inspired by the possibility of what we can cultivate and develop?

I've talked a lot about relative bodhichitta, which is compassion and compassionate action in the world. I want to say just a few words about the more ultimate bodhichitta, which goes beyond the notions of self and other, beyond any sense of separation. Because ultimate bodhichitta is the free, open nature of the mind itself. It's the experience of emptiness—emptiness of self.

There's a wonderful Tibetan teacher named Dzigar Kongtrul who said, "The experience of emptiness is not found outside the world of ordinary appearance, as many people mistakenly assume." Emptiness—a word we hear commonly in Buddhist teachings—is not some mystical far-off state. It's not found outside the world of ordinary appearance. In truth, we experience emptiness when the mind is free of grasping at anything. The mind free of clinging. That's within ourselves. That's within our own capacity to practice. And that's what our practice, in fact, is about.

One of the great turning points in my own practice was hearing these teachings of relative and ultimate bodhichitta—of compassion and emptiness—and realizing that compassion and emptiness of self are not two different things. They're not two separate things. In the union of these two, relative and ultimate bodhichitta, which is the nature of our own heart-mind, compassion is the activity of emptiness.

When I heard that and realized it, it was almost like a revelation. It was understanding that yes, the freer we are from attachment to the view of self, the more that freedom manifests as compassionate responsiveness. That is the activity of this understanding.

So this is compassion not as a stance of the ego. It's not a question of being a particular meditation practice that we do. Rather, it's the heart and mind that is free of self-reference. And of course, that's what our Vipassana practice is about.

The more we practice the selfless compassion of bodhicitta, the more easily we recognize the mind's empty nature. And this is how the two relate to one another. The more we practice compassion, the more we realize and experience selflessness as we engage in that responsiveness. And the more we recognize the empty, selfless nature of this whole mind-body process, the more compassionate and responsive we become.

Understanding the union of these two practices—emptiness of self and compassion—and seeing that their union is one, I found this tremendously energizing for my practice of both.

I'd like to close with a teaching that very succinctly expresses this understanding. It was a teaching by one of the great Tibetan masters of the last century, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, "When you recognize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena, when you recognize the empty, selfless nature of this mind-body process, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

Compassion is the activity of emptiness. When we recognize that selfless nature of this mind-body process, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless.

This is the great work that we are all engaged in.

CHAPTER 19

# Working with Thoughts and Emotions

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses two of the most pervasive aspects of human experience: thought and emotion. He frames this exploration through the lens of the two truths—relative (conventional) and ultimate (emptiness)—explaining how both levels must be integrated for mature spiritual practice, avoiding both attachment to personal stories and spiritual bypass.*
>
> *Drawing from the Dhammapada and the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19) on two kinds of thoughts, Goldstein emphasizes the Buddha's teaching that "whatever we frequently think about or ponder will become the inclination of our minds." He explores the full meaning of sati (mindfulness) as both remembering what is skillful and unskillful, and settling back into present-moment awareness. The talk offers practical strategies ranging from simple noting to the "sword of wisdom" for persistent unwholesome patterns, while cautioning against aversion to the thinking process itself.*
>
> *Goldstein guides practitioners to investigate thought on the ultimate level by asking "What is a thought?"—revealing thoughts as insubstantial phenomena that hold tremendous power only when unexamined. He extends this investigation to emotions, teaching how to recognize trigger points, distinguish between similar feelings like sadness and unhappiness, and use the sense of struggle as feedback for non-acceptance. The talk culminates in the liberating practice of experiencing all emotions without identification—transforming afflictive states into wisdom through the simple recognition that "it's okay."*

Tonight I'd like to speak about two of the most far-reaching and pervasive aspects of our experience, aspects that condition both the suffering in our lives and also the possibilities for happiness. These two aspects play out both in our meditation practice and in our lives: the realms of thought and emotion.

In order to have a fuller understanding of how we can work with thought and emotion, I think it's helpful to understand and put them in the context of what are called the two truths. That is, the level of relative conventional truth or reality, and the level of more ultimate truth, more ultimate reality. We can also understand these two levels in another way: the relative level is the level of content and the level of karma, of cause and effect. The more ultimate level we could think of in terms of process or in terms of understanding emptiness.

When we look at thought and emotion in terms of these two levels—the relative and the more ultimate—we see that they work to balance our approach in working with these aspects of our minds. It's important to consider both the relative and ultimate levels because, particularly in spiritual practice, it's very easy to become attached to one level or another. We're very familiar with being attached to the relative level because that's the level of our personal stories and our dramas. We get caught up in the content of our minds, so it's easy to see the attachment to that level. But it's also possible, and this can happen on the spiritual journey, for people to get a glimpse of emptiness, the more ultimate level, and then become attached to that while ignoring the relative. That's the whole phenomenon of spiritual bypass, where we're not attending to the relative, to the content, to the things that need attending to, because we up-level everything—it's all empty. A maturity in practice is really when we understand how these two levels form a union, and we integrate them into our lives.

The union of these two levels was expressed in a very pithy way by the Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim, a Korean Zen master who died some years ago. He said, "There's no right and no wrong"—that's the emptiness level—"but right is right and wrong is wrong." That's the relative level. And we have to hold both. There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong.

The importance of working with thought and emotion is highlighted in all of the different Buddhist traditions. One Tibetan text describes the untrained mind as tumbling like a waterfall. Does that sound familiar in terms of one's own experience? Where the mind is just tumbling with thoughts and feelings and emotions. There's one verse in the Dhammapada, a collection of Buddhist teachings from the Pali Canon, where the Buddha said, "The active mind is difficult to tame, flighty and wandering wherever it will. Taming it is essential, leading to the joy of well-being."

We all know this tendency of the mind to be flighty, wandering where it will. We know this from our own experience. How many times do we hop on trains of thought association? We hop on a particular thought and then there's this train of thought. We don't know that we've hopped on. We have no idea where the train is going. Then somewhere down the line, it's like we wake up and hop off the train, often in a very different mental environment from where we started. We can see this deeply habituated tendency.

The question then is: how do we work with thoughts, this very pervasive aspect of our minds? How do we learn to understand and to creatively shape the thought process? This is again from the Dhammapada. Remember, the Buddha lived around 500 BC,

so his images are not necessarily the ones we're familiar with today, but you can imagine from his time. He said, "Just as an arrow maker shapes an arrow, so the wise develop the mind, so excitable, uncertain, and difficult to control."

With quickly passing thoughts, the ones that simply arise and pass through, we can practice refining our awareness of them by beginning to notice where in that thought process we become aware that we're thinking. Just pay attention: where in that process do we wake up? Is it after the thought is already over? That happens very often—we're lost in the thought and then it's over, and we realize, "Ah, I was thinking." Sometimes we wake up in the middle of the thought. Sometimes, when the mind is clear, we can actually be aware just as the thought arises. And sometimes we can even become aware of the intention to think. This is how the meditation can develop at different times. What's important is simply to notice whenever it is that you become aware. This begins to hone our attention with thought, or to thought as an object.

The important point here, as we become mindful of thinking, is not to add a judgment or the attitude of aversion to the thinking process, or resistance. Suzuki Roshi, who was the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*—a classic that came out in the late sixties or early seventies—had a phrase that speaks to this.

He said, "Don't be bothered by your thoughts. Let them come and let them go." What an inviting instruction. Don't be bothered by your thoughts. Let them come and let them go.

But when we have longer trains of thoughts, when we're really lost or caught up for an extended period of time in the whole story, then we need different strategies—or with thoughts that come again and again, repeatedly. In this situation, we need to understand the broader meaning of the Pali word *sati*, which is usually translated as mindfulness, but which has a wide range of meaning and application.

The root meaning of the Pali word *sati* is to remember. And the question is: remember what? Two aspects are highlighted in terms of what we should be remembering in the development of *sati*. One is remembering or calling to mind what is skillful and what is unskillful, what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. And the other aspect we need to remember is the present moment's experience. Here is the meaning of *sati* or mindfulness: coming face to face with what's arising. This is just the opposite of absent-mindedness. There's mindfulness, wise mindfulness, right mindfulness—and there's absent-mindedness, when we're not coming face to face with the present moment.

Mindfulness as remembering the present moment, or we could say settling back into the present moment, counteracts the very strong tendency, both in our meditation practice and in our lives, to be leaning forward into the next experience. We're leaning forward in our lives in anticipation of the next event or the next experience. And in meditation too—this is a common tendency—we're leaning into the next moment. We're with the in-breath in order to feel the out-breath. We're lifting the foot in order to move it forward. There's that slight forward lean.

It's expressed very well in a line by James Joyce describing one of his characters. He wrote, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." And I think Mr. Duffy describes most of us. We're a little bit ahead of ourselves.

One way you can tune into this—and this is a very skillful practice that you can do throughout the day—is to pay attention to the feeling of rushing. You're all familiar with that feeling, that internal sense. What is rushing? What does that feeling come from? We're rushing when the mind is ahead of itself a bit. We're here in order to get there, and we're not actually settled back in the moment.

So as you go through the day, whenever you feel that you're rushing—and it doesn't have anything to do with speed; you can rush moving quickly, you can rush moving slowly, and you can be free of rushing whether moving quickly or moving slowly. I saw this really clearly once when I was paying attention to this in my practice and really noticing it many times during the day, that slight leaning forward. I was doing walking meditation, and then the lunch bell rang. I was walking just as slowly, but I could feel that inner pull toward the dining room.

This mindfulness of remembering the present moment is really helpful. By noticing the times of rushing through the day, you'll notice those times when you are out of the moment, when you're a bit ahead of yourself. And you can stop, cut the momentum, and simply come back.

In remembering the present moment with regard to thought, the challenge is that these objects of mind are very slippery. They seem to slide into our experience, and they don't have a big initial impact. There's not the same impingement on our awareness that, for example, sensations have. When different sensations arise in the body, we're generally aware of them quite quickly. Or even sounds, because there's an impact. But thoughts—they're so sneaky. They just kind of slide in, and we're often unaware that they're there. Before we realize it, we're carried away in this mental proliferation. It's like we're lost in the dream of our own mental activity. And it really is like a dream state, because we're not aware at that time that the thoughts are present. It's as if we're dreaming ourselves into existence.

And that's why mindfulness of thought is such a powerful vehicle for waking up.

Mindfulness of thought in both its aspects—that is, recalling what is skillful and unskillful as one aspect of mindfulness, and also the aspect of remembering the present moment, being connected to the present moment—both of these aspects of mindfulness with regard to thought serve as a great protection for the mind. Because it keeps us from being lost in all those thought trains that condition our suffering. Suffering for ourselves, suffering for others. Without mindfulness of thought, we are simply acting out all the habit patterns of our conditioning.

The importance of this was highlighted in a teaching by Ajahn Sumedho, the American monk who was the senior disciple of Ajahn Chah and who brought the Thai forest tradition to the West. He said, "Our life in the Dharma is not about following the heart, it's about training the heart." I think this is a really important reminder, because often, in new age circles, we hear "just follow your heart." Being experienced meditators, you already know that not everything in our heart is wholesome. There is a lot that is, but unless you happen to be a saint—and if you are, please let me know—it's not just a question of following whatever arises. It's actually training it.

Part of this training is discerning what's skillful and what's unskillful. Carol spoke last night of the Buddha's discourse on two kinds of thoughts, where he was describing as a bodhisattva how one of his practices was to see what thoughts were skillful and what thoughts were unskillful, what was rooted in greed and hatred and delusion, what was rooted in generosity and love and wisdom. So we begin to actually discern the different kinds of thoughts.

In that same sutta Carol was speaking about, the Buddha goes on to say why this is so important. She mentioned this last night, but I felt I wanted to repeat it again tonight, because it is such an essential teaching that we often overlook. The Buddha said, "Whatever we frequently think about or ponder will become the inclination of our minds." How often do we relate to thought as just a passing phenomenon, thinking it doesn't really have much impact? But whatever we frequently think about and ponder becomes the habit pattern, becomes the inclination. That neural pathway becomes more and more strongly established, and so it's easier for that kind of thought, that same thought, to arise again. We're establishing a habit pattern.

If we realize this, then we can see the importance of discerning what habit patterns we are establishing and deepening and strengthening in our lives. Are we strengthening habit patterns of desire, of ill will? Are we strengthening habit patterns of kindness, of generosity? We do this through mindfulness of our thoughts, discerning what is skillful and what is unskillful.

There's a reflection the Buddha suggested in this same discourse, and I want to read it because it's not something we often do. In the teaching of meditation here, we don't often emphasize reflecting as a method. But there are times when it can be really helpful. This is the Buddha describing his own practice on his path to Buddhahood:

"When a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I understood thus: this thought of sensual desire has arisen in me, and this leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulty, and leads away from nibbāna."

Now this is the part that really struck me. He said, "When I considered 'this leads to my own affliction,' this thought leads to my own suffering, it subsided in me." When we reflect on unskillful kinds of thoughts rooted in unwholesome motivations, if we see it, if we recognize it and then reflect, "This leads to my own affliction"—that becomes a powerful reminder, and it subsided in him. When he considered "this leads to the affliction or the suffering of others," it subsided. When he considered "it leads to the affliction of both," it subsided. Do you see the power of the mind to actually reflect when there's a strong repetition or pattern of thoughts rooted in unwholesome motivations?

So we can really begin to work with our thought patterns, cultivating those which lead to happiness and learning to let go of those which simply cause suffering.

Sometimes this reflection may not be enough. The pattern may be really strong. I had an experience many years ago, in my younger years, when I was on retreat and a strong lustful thought kept coming—thought and image—and it was hugely seductive, just so enticing. I recognized it: "This is a lustful thought, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant." But recognizing it didn't do anything. And I knew it was unwholesome, that it was rooted in greed.

So I needed a stronger strategy. I call it the sword of wisdom. Sometimes when something has been coming up a lot, we've seen it many times, we understand it, there's no danger that we're simply suppressing it. At that point, after ten thousand times, it wasn't a question of suppression. So I said, "Joseph, enough." Take the sword of wisdom. No. Enough of this.

And it really helped. It was like meeting the thought with commensurate strength.

Now, the key to this approach is not doing it with aversion. It's realizing we can have a strength of mind. So much of Vipassana practice, rightfully, is about the yes to things. We talk about opening, about yes, about accepting. A lot of what we do is that move toward acceptance. But there's also a skillful use of no—what I call the wisdom of no—where we see that something's unskillful and we try different approaches.

Imagine raising a child and never saying no. It probably wouldn't be a very happy coexistence. There are times when we need no, but it can be done in a loving way.

So again, this is the play of practice. I hope you get the sense that this whole retreat, as I mentioned, is a laboratory for investigation. We're discerning what thoughts are skillful, what are unskillful—which is an aspect of mindfulness. We play with different ways of cultivating what's wholesome, of letting go what's unwholesome. We see what method is going to be effective.

We also, with regard to thoughts, need to look not only at this discernment of skillful and unskillful, at what patterns we are strengthening—we also have to examine our attitude about thinking itself. Because, as I think Carol mentioned, it's very easy to come into the practice with the idea that we want to stop thinking, or that thinking is bad.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks a lot about this. I just want to read a few of his suggestions. He said, "When the mind is thinking or wandering, just be aware of it. Thinking is a natural activity of the mind. You are doing well if you are aware that the mind is thinking. When you feel disturbed by the thinking mind, remind yourself that you are not practicing to prevent thinking, but rather to recognize and acknowledge thinking whenever it arises. It does not matter whether thinking stops or not. It is more important that you understand whether your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, appropriate or inappropriate, necessary or unnecessary."

So when the mind is caught up in a lot of thought, in addition to the discernment of wholesome and unwholesome, really check the attitude in the mind about the fact that you're thinking. Is there aversion? Is there judgment? Is there resistance? Or is there simple awareness of it?

We've been speaking mostly about thought and dealing with thought on the relative level, the level of content. But in our practice we also want to understand thought on the more ultimate level of emptiness. This is when we're investigating not the content of thought, but the very nature of thought itself.

A question that has been very profound for me in my practice, especially when there are many thoughts coming, is one I often ask myself: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is a thought as a phenomenon?

It's very interesting. And yet this is a question probably very few people in the world have ever asked themselves. Mostly we're just lost in our thoughts and acting them out. But when we're looking directly at a thought, when it's there and we ask, "Well, what is

this as a phenomenon?"—it's completely fascinating. We see that in and of itself, a thought is little more than nothing. It's a completely insubstantial, ephemeral phenomenon.

What's so amazing about this is to see that when we're unaware of thinking, when we're not mindful, thoughts have tremendous power in our lives. Thoughts are like little dictators in the mind: Go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced. Our whole life, it's like we're just doing the bidding of all these thoughts. There's tremendous power when we're not mindful of them.

And yet as soon as we are mindful of a thought as a thought, as soon as we see its nature, we see it has no power at all. It's a completely empty phenomenon. When we really see that clearly, it's revelatory. It really changes how we're living, what we're doing, and what we choose to act on.

Khenpo Rinpoche, who was one of the great Tibetan masters of the last century—his teachings are quite amazing and clear—wrote this about thoughts: "When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors.

Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions—light, moisture, air. In the right conditions, a rainbow appears. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all. There is therefore no logical reason why thoughts should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us. But as long as we take our deluded thoughts as real, they will continue to torment us mercilessly as they have been doing through countless past lives.

And whether you believe in past lives or not, we know just in this life the merciless torment of the thinking process.

This insight into the empty nature of thought is not some esoteric advanced practice or teaching that requires thirty years in a cave to understand. We can understand this right now if we take thought as an object, if we see that a thought can be an object of mindfulness in the same way that a sensation or a sound or the breath or movement can be—it's just another object for our attention. And we can take an interest in it.

One game you can play—I call it the thought game. If you're interested in investigating this more deeply, you might take ten or fifteen minutes in a sitting where you decide that your only object of awareness is going to be thought. It's like sitting back in a movie theater, just watching the screen of the mind, simply waiting for thoughts to come.

First, because you're waiting for them, you'll actually be happy when they do come. Instead of fighting them, you think, "Oh good, a thought! That's what I'm waiting for." So this changes your attitude entirely—we actually become happy to see them. Then we begin to notice, because we're watching the screen of the mind, that thoughts appear on many different levels. Some are really loud and clear and obvious, and some are soft and subtle, like whispers in the mind. And some sneak up from behind: "Oh, I'm doing pretty good." So we need a 360-degree screen.

Try this if it appeals to you. Just do it for ten or fifteen minutes, and you'll see that there's an immediacy to our ability to really learn about the nature of thought—both on the relative level, discerning the content, understanding what's wholesome and unwholesome, and even more liberating, seeing thought on the more ultimate level of its emptiness, its insubstantiality.

Mindfulness of thought can also lead quite directly into a greater awareness and mindfulness of emotions. As we all know, emotions are complex phenomena. An emotion is a constellation of physical sensation, of thought, of different qualities of the heart—all together they constitute what we call an emotion.

There is a wide range in our ability to know what we're feeling. For some people, for whatever reason of conditioning, it may be quite difficult to connect with what we're feeling. We might be going through our lives not really understanding or recognizing that there is some underlying emotion motivating many of our actions. Maybe it's an underlying emotion of desire, or fear, or unworthiness, or shame—it could be anything. The emotion is there and we may not have tuned into it, yet it's conditioning how we act and are in the world.

For other people, we may actually know what we're feeling, we may recognize what emotion is there, but still be caught up and lost and carried away, identified with it—carried away in this flood tide of emotion. We know what the emotion is, but we haven't yet found a skillful way of being with it.

There are different ways we can train ourselves to be mindful of emotions in general, and more specifically with the afflictive emotions—those feelings that cause suffering in our lives, both for ourselves and others.

One very interesting aspect of our minds to observe—and I've taken tremendous interest in this—is how a particular thought or image can trigger immediately an emotional response. We may think of someone who hurt us in some way, and immediately it triggers anger or ill will or resentment. Or we think of someone we love, and just in the moment of seeing the image or having the thought, it triggers an open-hearted feeling. Or we might think of someone we're strongly attracted to, and just the image or thought of that person arises and maybe immediately lust arises in the mind.

These trigger points can be so quick, so immediate. And all of this can be happening just as you're here, sitting and walking and moving about, with no actual contact with that person at all.

That whole emotional reactivity can be triggered simply by an unnoticed thought or an unnoticed feeling. And even when they are noticed, if we can watch this process—seeing the thought and how it can trigger an emotion—it really helps us both to be more mindful of the emotion, because we're seeing it right from the beginning, and also we begin to see more and more deeply the conditioned nature of that emotion.

I've played with this a lot and I just find it fascinating. One time I was noticing how particular thoughts of a person and a situation would trigger either anxiety or ill will. With one situation, it was something I had to do, and I had the thought about it and felt a little anxious. Another was thinking of a person with whom there had been a little bit of conflict—the person came to mind and immediately there was a feeling of irritation and annoyance.

In noticing this, I started playing. I started intentionally having those thoughts. I would intentionally think of that person or think of that situation. And it's just like pressing a little button. Thought of the person, ill will. Thought of the situation, anxiety. And I kept doing this. It was just amazing to me, the process of seeing it—how does that happen? How can a thought in the mind trigger quite a big response?

At a certain point, just as I was playing with this phenomenon, the impersonality of it all became so obvious it became humorous. It was just watching the mind do its thing. And it really helped to see the conditioned nature of these emotions. I don't know whether you find it as amusing as I do, but there it is.

Another way of tuning into emotions that we might not have noticed: one of the signals I've found useful is simply to see when we're going through the day and there's some feeling of unease or unhappiness, something that just doesn't feel quite right. That itself, that feeling of unease, can be a signal for us to look, to take a little more care and investigate. Is there an underlying emotion here that I'm not paying attention to, that

I'm not open to, that I'm not aware of? It might be unacknowledged worry, or unacknowledged anxiety, or fear, or aversion. Something is going on which is giving us that feeling of unease. So we can use the uneasiness as a wake-up call to ask, what is the emotion that's underneath? If we don't tune into it, then these underlying emotions can become the unconscious filter through which we're looking at all experience.

Another reminder to look at what's going on in terms of unacknowledged emotions: I find when you're going through the day and you're doing something and you just have some sense that it's not quite right, that's a signal worth heeding. I'll give you an example. This happened years ago. I was on retreat here at IMS. You know in the dining room sometimes at lunch there'll be a dish and in front there'll be a little sign: "Moderation please." So I was going through the line and they had this sign in front of something I really liked. I'm going through the line thinking, I really like this, I've been on a long retreat, and I deserve it. So I took more than I really should have. But even as I was doing it, there was this feeling: this isn't quite right.

That feeling—oh, this is a little bit off—prompted me to ask, what's going on here? I started looking at what was underneath that action. And I saw it, I mean it's obvious: I saw the greed and the desire. Then I was back at my place at the table eating, and I felt the shame and the embarrassment. I kept looking over to see if there was enough left for people at the end of the line. That whole meal was consumed by these emotions.

So we can use these times when something is telling us, this doesn't feel quite right, to actually look, to investigate what happens both as a motivation and as a consequence of those actions. It all becomes food for our understanding. We want to understand all these different aspects of ourselves and all the different emotions that may be driving our actions.

Sometimes we don't recognize what's going on because we mistake one emotion for another. We're misperceiving what's actually there. One common misperception, which could be a whole talk in itself, is confusing attachment and love. These are two quite different states. But that's for another talk.

Another example of misperceiving, which was very striking to me: I was on retreat and I was feeling really sad for whatever reason. I was just noticing it—sad, sad, sad—but it felt locked in in some way. It didn't feel like it was just moving through. So then I began to wonder, well, what's really going on here?

When I looked more carefully, I saw that it wasn't sadness—it was unhappiness. They're related, but they are different feelings, not the same thing at all. As soon as I recognized clearly what it was, that made possible the acceptance of it, and the accept-

ance made possible the letting go. As long as I was misperceiving the emotion, I wasn't aligned with what was actually there, and so it was not possible to get to that place of acceptance.

I'm not suggesting at all that with every feeling that comes up you go on an investigative quest, asking "What's this? Am I perceiving it correctly?" Not that at all. But if you feel caught in some way—if you're going along and you really feel stuck in some emotional state, and you try different ways of relating to it and being with it—then at that time you might look and ask, "What's really happening here?" Just to see if you're perceiving it correctly.

Clear recognition makes possible the next step in working with emotion: mindful acceptance. We can recognize clearly and accurately what emotion is there, but another whole understanding involves our relationship to that emotion. Mindful acceptance doesn't mean justifying it, doesn't mean wallowing in it, and doesn't mean judging. Rather, it's the simple acknowledgment that a particular state is present.

The Buddha spoke very directly to this in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness. The first instruction he gave in working with the hindrances and different mind states and emotions was this: if sensual desire or aversion or worry or any other state is present, one knows desire or aversion or restlessness is present. It's that simple. First, simply to know that it's present. That's the mindful acceptance of what's arising.

Now, one indication of non-acceptance—and this has proved very useful to me over the years of practice—is recognizing the sense of struggle. In the course of your day, just notice when it feels like you're struggling. Struggle means only one thing: something is going on in the body or in the mind that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

This is powerful feedback. Instead of getting lost in the struggle and feeling sorry for ourselves or discouraged, take struggle as a mindfulness bell. Struggle is telling us something is happening that we're not open to. It may be feelings in the body, it may be difficult emotions, it may be the fact that the mind is thinking a lot. If we're not accepting of it, we're going to be struggling. So use that as feedback to look, to really see.

We all have established a comfort zone of experience that we're comfortable with. In our meditation practice, we come to the boundaries of what we're comfortable with—maybe intense physical sensation, maybe strong emotions. We get to that edge of our comfort zone, and it's very interesting to observe what we do at that point. Do we just pull back to get comfortable again? Or are we willing to say, "Let me open to this"?

When we open, our comfort zone gets bigger and bigger. My imagination of the Buddha mind—and this is just an imagination—is a mind without boundaries, where there's no edge, where the mind is totally free in the awareness of whatever's arising.

In this process of opening, we also need to be careful when we're at that edge, because sometimes things are coming up that can be too intense or overwhelming for our ability to be balanced. Sometimes people are reliving old traumas or very intense experiences, and we may not have the capacity at that time to open. When we're losing balance, when we're feeling overwhelmed by what's arising, then the wise and skillful thing to do is to pull back a little, to come to a place of more balance, of more ease. When we've regained some balance, we can again approach the edge. This is the dance of bringing mindfulness to these edges, to these boundaries, and then proceeding appropriately.

The last step in working with emotions—and this is both the most challenging and the most liberating, with those that are afflictive and those that are skillful—is learning how to be with all emotions without identifying with them, without taking them to be self.

And it's this understanding that transforms all emotions into wisdom.

So what does identification with emotion mean? We're very familiar with it. It's when we're lost or caught up or identified. "I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm excited, I'm enthusiastic, I'm depressed." In all of those ways of being with emotion, we have created the sense of self in them. What we learn through practice, through being mindful of emotion, is that the "I" and "mine" are extra. We can open to all of these states and be completely connected with them, feel them and experience them, without identification, without personalizing them.

For myself, the main afflictive emotion in my practice over the years was fear. It would come up for a long time in very intense ways. It was as if my energy system was opening to primal fear. It wasn't rational—there were times when I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. Irrational, but the emotion was just very powerful.

I worked with this for years, and it took me that long to understand that all that time I was recognizing the fear was there, but I was taking recognition to be mindfulness. Really, I was with it in order for it to go away. All along there was aversion to the fear, and I didn't realize for quite a while that the aversion was feeding it. It was only when I came to a place of acceptance that non-identification could happen. It was expressed as a very vivid thought in my mind: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay. It's okay."

So I actually offer this to you as a magic mantra for the next six weeks or three months: "It's okay." Whatever's arising, it's okay. Because it reminds us to soften, to settle back—that it may be unpleasant, but it's okay to feel it.

One last comment about emotions: how we relate to them depends on our level of understanding. What may make one person very upset, what may feel difficult in one situation, may leave another person quite at ease.

My favorite story illustrating this is about the Zen master Ryokan, the poet, hermit, and monk who was very poor and lived in the mountains of Japan, wandering through the villages. He had almost nothing. One day he came back to his hut and the few possessions he had were stolen—everything was gone. But he was a great haiku poet, and so he wrote:

*The moon at the window—the thief left it behind.*

Just imagine going home after this retreat and everything is stolen. "Oh, the moon at the window." Probably not.

Our emotional response to things very much depends on the level of wisdom we bring. I think you'll see in the course of this retreat, as we develop a deepening wisdom about how to work with thoughts and emotions, that our relationship to them becomes much freer. We come to live our lives seeing how different thoughts and emotions are simply conditioned arisings in this open, clear sky of the heart and mind.

This is our practice, and this is the potential for greater freedom for all of us.

CHAPTER 20

# Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h04

> *In this engaging Q&A session from a three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein responds to practitioners' questions spanning fundamental Buddhist concepts. He begins by exploring the three refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha), explaining how refuge in the Buddha means refuge in the clarity of understanding and methodology of practice, while the Ariya Saṅgha represents the living proof that awakening is genuinely possible.*
>
> *Goldstein offers a profound teaching on intimacy and loneliness, sharing his teacher Munindraji's wisdom about being "friends with the clouds" and explaining how true intimacy arises through complete presence with each moment rather than requiring another person. He addresses the perennial question of how karma operates without a self (anattā), using the metaphor of a seed transforming into a tree—a lawful process of becoming without any unchanging entity being carried through.*
>
> *The discussion turns to practical matters of integrating practice into daily life, emphasizing right speech as a crucial arena for off-retreat practice. Goldstein also explores the subtle craving for becoming (bhava-taṇhā)—the tendency to lean into the unfolding of experience—and how simply asking "what's the attitude in the mind?" can reveal and release this subtle clinging. He concludes with encouragement about working with conceit (māna), the last defilement to be uprooted, suggesting we greet its arising with delight rather than judgment.*

So the question was about the understanding that refuge really means a kind of safety or protection, and understanding how the precepts provide that, but wondering about the other refuges—in the Buddha and the Dharma and the Sangha—how they work.

This could be a whole talk.

In terms of refuge in the Buddha, I think this was talked about on the opening night, but it's worth understanding what that means for oneself on different levels. On one level, the Buddha was a historical person who gave certain teachings, and we have access to those teachings. The teachings themselves provide a refuge, first in their clarity. It's really quite amazing as you read the suttas, this vast body of teachings, and see the clarity with which the Buddha understood the nature of this mind and body, what are the causes of suffering, and what's the potentiality for freedom. So it is a real refuge.

We can take refuge in that clarity rather than living our lives in a lot of confusion, as most of the world does. We can see the fruit of not actually knowing, on some deep level, what are the causes of happiness, what are the causes of suffering, and not having a certain methodology to be able to make those choices. Without this, we're simply acting out unconsciously the habit patterns of our conditioning. So that's a huge refuge—the clarity of understanding and the methodology of practice. In some way, that is also the refuge in the Dharma.

You may know this quite famous story in the texts where there was a monk who was completely enamored of the physical form of the Buddha. He would always be sitting and just gazing at the form. That might be seen as devotion, but at a certain point the Buddha admonished him and said, "You could look at this form for a hundred years and not see the Buddha. It's only those who see the Dharma, who understand the Dharma, who see the Buddha." In that way, the refuge in the Buddha and the refuge in the Dharma are the same. When we understand the Dharma, that's when we're seeing the Buddha.

The refuge in the Sangha, again, can mean many things. Very traditionally, Sangha refers to the monastic Sangha—that's the traditional meaning of the term, nuns and monks. There is a certain refuge in this, even though most of us in the West may not have an intimate connection with the monastic Sangha, although many of you might. There can be a tremendous appreciation for realizing that you can almost say the institution of the monastics over 2,600 years has preserved the teachings. We're benefiting from all of those nuns and monks over thousands of years who have preserved the teachings and made them accessible to us. So that's one meaning.

Another meaning is what's called the Arya Sangha, and that refers to any being, lay person or monastic, who has realized at least one of the stages of awakening, of realization, who has really realized for themselves the depth of the Buddhist teachings. This is a refuge in a sense, and I'm actually glad you asked the question because this is something I think is sometimes not emphasized enough in the West. It's a refuge in the understanding that awakening, enlightenment, liberation, freedom, peace—whatever word you want to put on it—is actually possible. Now we can hold that as an aspiration in our practice.

Very often, and you see this in the tremendous popularization of mindfulness, which is a great thing and is really helping a lot of people, that popularization is devoid of the understanding that this leads to something profound. This has the potential to free the mind, to actually free the mind from the forces of greed and hatred and delusion, which are so deeply embedded. When we take refuge in the Sangha, the Arya Sangha—

all those beings, monastic and lay people who have realized this for themselves, even to the first stage—it makes real the possibility. That's a tremendous refuge in our lives. We can have the aspiration of awakening as the pole star guiding us on our path.

You're in a fantastic situation here where your whole day, every day for six weeks or three months, is just about mindfulness and paying attention and waking up. All of that can be done with this vast aspiration: let this be for my own liberation and the benefit of all others. That's a tremendous refuge where we enlarge the potential. We enlarge our understanding of what's possible.

The next question referenced Guy's talk on Sunday night, quoting from Nisargadatta with the phrase "the disaster of separation"—and recognizing how we're living a whole lifetime with deep anxiety around that. The questioner said they're not asking how to get rid of it, but for some guidelines about what to look for in it, sensing there's a very important lesson to be learned here.

Although you're not asking how to get rid of it, I'm going to tell you.

And in the telling, it will also point to what to look for.

"That's what I'm not trying to get rid of."

Don't expect to get rid of that specifically.

"Well, don't hold on to it too tightly because loneliness—" You just shifted my...

I was just talking with a yogi in an interview. There's a book that I've been wanting to write for years. It's basically a three-sentence book, so you would think I could have written it by now. The title of the book is *The Myth of Intimacy*.

What I mean by that is that the general myth of intimacy is that it requires someone else—requires another being to create that field of intimacy. And in one way or another, if that's not present in our lives, we often feel lonely. We feel that sense of separation. So that's the myth of intimacy.

The experience—or at least my experience—of intimacy has nothing whatsoever to do with the presence or absence of another person. It has to do with something you need to take in, because it would be easy to let these words just slide over you. But they actually refer to your experience while you're here.

Practice is actually to experience—and you do experience, even if you're not paying attention to it in this way—that we are becoming completely intimate with each moment. So if you're sitting and feeling the breath and there is a complete connection and

feeling of that breath, there is no separation in that moment. Or hearing a sound. When you are totally hearing a sound and just hearing, or totally feeling the sensations of a breath, in that moment, are you lonely? I don't think so. Because there is a complete being one with the experience. There's not a duality in that moment that creates separation, which then can result in the feeling of loneliness.

As I mentioned in this interview, years ago when I first went to India, I was walking with Munindraji, my first teacher, around Bodh Gaya, just in the little villages around Bodh Gaya on these dirt paths. And he said something then which at the time I dismissed. I thought it was very hokey. For those of you not native English speakers, do you know what the word hokey means? It's a hard word—silly. I didn't take it seriously. But he said, as we'd be walking around, "I'm never lonely. I'm friends with the clouds. I'm friends with the flowers. I'm friends with the dust on the path." And again, when I heard it at the time, I was about twenty-one years old and it did not go over too well.

But over the years of my practice, I have so come to appreciate the depth of what he was trying to tell me—that when we actually are fully experiencing whatever it is that's arising, there is that ongoing sense of intimacy and non-separation and non-loneliness. It's only when we separate ourselves from experience that this feeling emerges.

And just as an example of this, which often strikes me both in watching yogis on retreat and being on retreat myself: what do you think somebody who has never done intensive meditation practice would think of somebody spending half an hour or an hour walking fifteen steps back and forth? It would probably look like an insane asylum. And they would probably think, "That is the most boring thing in the world." They couldn't imagine doing it. And yet when we do it, as you know, when the mind is fully there, just that, just that movement—it's amazing. To be so completely one with the flow of sensations, everything is complete in that moment.

So all that being said, in those moments when you're not fully engaged in that way, and there is a sense of separation for whatever reason, and the feeling of loneliness should arise—"Lonely. Lonely. Loneliness is like this." If you can recognize it and accept it and not be afraid of it and not be averse to it, and remember that as soon as you are reconnected with the moment that sense of separation disappears—there's talk about refuge. That is a fantastic refuge.

So if you'd like to buy the book, *The Myth of Intimacy*, it'll be available some year.

It's so interesting to me—we're so conditioned to think that our happiness, our fulfillment, our connectedness depends on something outside of ourselves, on someone outside of ourselves. And it's all how we're relating to the moment, to the world. It doesn't really depend on how the world is relating to us.

"In regards to anattā, I understand how the ego is anicca, but can you speak on who owns the karma that we should own?"

Okay, so the question is about anattā and how the ego is anicca.

"But like in reincarnation, in the idea—"

Yes, yes. If there's no self, who's reborn?

If there's no self, who experiences karmic results? Just so you know, I think the most frequently asked preface to a question is, "If there's no self, then..." This whole notion of selflessness is so counterintuitive. Our whole lives and conditioning in the world and language—it's all revolving around the subject. That's why the Buddhist teaching and our practice in the realization of selflessness is like a little bombshell in the midst of the solidity of that conditioning.

The understanding really has to do with seeing more and more clearly that this mind-body process, as you see and realize, is changing moment to moment. Each moment is conditioning the next and conditioning the next, but there's no element which is carried over.

Consider a few different examples. If you plant a seed in the ground and the seed germinates and sprouts, becomes a sapling, becomes a tree, bears fruit, the fruit drops to the ground, producing a new seed—it's not that the first seed was carried into the sapling and then into the tree and then into the fruit, and that same seed then falls to the ground. There's nothing carried over. It is more a process of transformation, of becoming. The seed, due to various conditions, becomes this, becomes this, becomes this. This is the process of becoming, which is what the Buddha called this whole cycle of life and death. It's just a process of becoming due to conditions, but it's becoming lawfully. When you plant an apple seed, you don't get a mango tree. There are laws governing the unfolding of the process. One of the laws is the law of karma, but there are other laws—the basic laws of science—which also govern the unfolding of the process.

Selflessness does not imply that the unfolding process is unlawful or chaotic or random. There can be a stream of consciousness arising and passing, arising and passing. What we would call your stream of consciousness is a different stream than mine—we're using "yours" and "mine" conventionally. But in that stream there's no one thing,

no self underneath the flow of changing phenomena. That's what's meant by selflessness: there's no enduring, unchanging entity to whom the process is happening. The process is unfolding moment after moment, but it is unfolding according to certain laws, and therefore the whole laws of cause and effect and karma can happen selflessly. They're not happening to someone. They are actually a description of how the process is unfolding.

It would be very interesting, when we talked about noticing every part of your experience, particularly noticing intention in the mind—when you notice an intention to do something, that's a mental phenomenon. The mental phenomenon becomes a condition for a physical action to take place. There's no one behind it. What we are is that process unfolding. We call that whole process self, and conventionally, using conventional language, it's fine to use that term. It's just that we're misled into thinking that all experience refers back to someone.

So instead of thinking of it like this—my thoughts, my feelings, my movement, my actions, everything referring back here—you might think of it like this: thoughts are arising, feelings are arising, sensations are arising, and they're arising and falling lawfully. This conditions this, conditions this, conditions this. We call the pattern of an unfolding life "self," which is fine. We use that conventionally. But there's no one there to whom it's happening. What we are is this unfolding process.

Has all of this been the cause of more confusion or less confusion? Or neither?

"Well, I have insights about how that makes sense, but is it integrated? No."

Patience. This is the hardest teaching. To have at least a clear understanding, even if it's just on the conceptual level—but by now it's probably dropped down somewhat, even more than the conceptual level—some glimpse of understanding it.

"In saying equanimity, that others may own their karma, it's kind of like in regards to time and space, this is your unfolding process here..."

Well, I think one of the difficulties, for example in that equanimity phrase—"you" or "I am the heir of my own karma"—we just need to be careful because even within the Buddha's teachings, very often we're using conventional language, conventional designation.

The Buddha used conventional language, talking about "I" and "you." People would come to him asking, "Where has this person been reborn?" Conventional language can be used. We just want to understand that it's being used on that conventional level, not on the level of ultimate reality—it's not the language of selflessness. So there's no need to be confused by it. It's fine to use such language.

Even in metta practice, the practice is happening on the relative level of being. "May you be happy, may I be happy." It would be very awkward to say, "May the five aggregates sitting over there be at ease." So there's really no problem in using the appropriate language. But we want to understand what is really the more ultimate reality underneath it all.

---

*Student:* During this process, I'm seeing that there are some beliefs that are now quite easy to see. And with the forgiveness practice, there's been a lot of opening up around all the actions taken from these beliefs. But I perceive a little fear about going back and acting from these beliefs again, because now it's so easy—or let's say, here it's easier—to see them.

*Joseph:* Well, there was one couple that stayed at the Forest Refuge for four years. You can just move in.

Obviously it is easier here, because this is a very protected environment with very little distraction. That's the great beauty and gift of a retreat like this. My experience is that, having gone in and out of retreat endless times over the last fifty years, it was a lot harder in the beginning. The disjunction between the two was quite big at first. But in just continuing the practice in a really committed way—being in retreat, then out of retreat, then back in retreat over many, many years—it actually does become more and more integrated. There's less of a sense of such a big difference, because through the repetition of seeing what's wholesome and what's unwholesome, you just see it over and over again, both here on retreat in our own minds, and then being watchful in our lives in the world, watching that same thing. What actions are causing suffering to myself or others? What actions don't? Just the repetition of that—which is why it's called practice.

There's a story of the great cellist Pablo Casals. At ninety-three, he was still practicing three hours a day. Someone asked him—here's this great master—"Why are you still practicing three hours a day?" And he said, "I'm beginning to see some improvement."

So you really want to think of practice both here while you're on retreat, but also the cycles of being in and out of retreat. Our understanding is not a slope that just goes steadily upward—it's not that it just gets clearer and better and purer in a straight line.

It's much more like this—up and down. But the overall slope of the curve is going up. There will be a lot of ups and downs, times when we're really clear and bright and in harmony, and then in some way we fall or forget. And then again we reconnect. But over time, the slope of the curve is rising, and we find the Dharma more and more integrated in our lives. I would just have confidence in that.

One area—and the teaching isn't so appropriate for the middle of a retreat, so I'll just mention it briefly—but it has tremendous benefit out in the world: exploring in depth and practicing with commitment right speech. In our lives in the world, we talk a lot. Most of the day we're in conversation one way or another. It's not so often that people actually pay attention before they speak to what they're about to say. So just that, as an arena of practice for bringing the Dharma into the world, would be huge.

---

*Student:* In yesterday's forgiveness meditation, going through the three phrases—receiving forgiveness or giving forgiveness—we used the phrasing about harms of which we're aware and also unaware. I'm really interested in the "unaware" piece. I think because it's probably the most frequent and most pervasive way we cause harm, through microaggressions or privilege—white privilege, entitlements. So I'm curious, even at a place like IMS, where there are few distractions but all of this is very much alive, even with amazing yogis who probably have the best intentions on the planet and are really committed to non-harm—what do we do with that? Are we really off the hook just because of the good intention?

*Joseph:* That's a great question. It's obviously easier to connect with asking for and extending forgiveness when we're conscious of the harm that was done. When we're not conscious of it—

we can start, I mean, just as a foundation for practice, simply asking for blanket forgiveness for all the things we've been unaware of. At least there's a seed of wisdom in that—in acknowledging that we may have done many things out of ignorance. Even that is significant, because many people don't even recognize that this is a part of their lives. So it's not insignificant, even if we're not yet conscious of the actual harm being done.

A lot of the work is actually in educating ourselves in those arenas where we may have some inkling that we're causing harm, but we don't quite know what it is. I'll give you a few examples. The staff, the teachers, and the board here have been doing consid-

erable work over these years in trying to understand and undo racism through various trainings. It's been so illuminating of exactly what you're describing—unconscious behavior slowly becoming conscious.

Just one piece from the training became more and more obvious: as you say, good intention is not enough, because there's a difference between intention and impact. We can have a good intention, and yet the impact of what we do may be harmful. Taking that in enlarges the arena of our investigation. Instead of simply noticing our intentions as best we can, we also start paying attention to the impact of those actions on the people around us. That's a beginning, where we're sensitizing ourselves to this dimension. Much of the work of becoming aware of unconscious harm involves self-education—realizing that these areas exist and taking it upon ourselves to learn about them and to see. It's a big arena, and I think we all have that responsibility.

I'll give you another example. Some years ago, there was a yogi on retreat who was, I didn't know until later, a very high-powered government consultant at the highest levels, doing considerable aid work around the world. Part of the Buddhist teachings, which I had expressed very often and fully believed, is a phrase found in different texts: "Everything rests on the tip of motivation." The motivation is really the key. He came into an interview and really got on my case about that. He said, "Yeah, that's half of it." But he had seen many situations in the world where the motivation for a particular aid action was good, yet the result was terrible—because there was not a good understanding of the situation. That was another way of opening up the recognition that it's more than just motivation. We need to enlarge our area of investigation. What is the result? What is the impact? Because often we act perhaps with good intention, but perhaps also with considerable delusion about the situation, where we're not really seeing or understanding it well.

One of the things that is almost the inevitable result of intensive practice is humility. It's almost impossible to sit and watch the mind, as we're all doing, and not develop a huge humility. When we really take an honest look at our minds and see everything that's in them, we just have to acknowledge, "Oh, there's a lot going on here." Much is beautiful—as you know, there are many beautiful qualities. But there's also considerable ignorance, where we're not seeing unskillful things. The beauty of the practice is that we get to see it. In that sense, it's really quite a courageous thing for people to sit down and look to see what's really there.

A question came up about understanding or getting a better idea of how the teaching culture has shifted over time. When many of us were practicing in Asia, the goal of enlightenment, Nibbāna, was clearly articulated—that's why you went to practice. It was

very strong. As we've taught in the West over many years, that emphasis seems to have faded somewhat in terms of the clarity with which it's put forward as the goal. I think that is true, which is why I was glad the question came up earlier.

One of the reasons for this shift is that, as we began teaching in the West, we really saw the potential and actualized hindrance of what you could call over-striving, where that goal orientation became out of balance.

Instead of being an aspiration that one was practicing towards, it became a vehicle for tightening people in their practice, for over-striving. And so it's possible we over-compensated, saying "just relax back into the moment, let it unfold."

So for those of you who are not over-strivers, this is only for you. The over-strivers, don't listen. For the non-over-strivers: Nibbana or bust. For the over-strivers: relax. There's a natural unfolding to the practice.

This is a good question, and it's part of something very interesting to observe—the larger picture of the transmission of the Dharma to the West. This is a huge transmission to a new culture, and relatively speaking, it's still very new. That it's really become so active here—thirty, forty, fifty years is nothing in the long history of the Dharma. So I think we're all really the laboratory for what works, what doesn't work, what needs to be emphasized, what doesn't. But just emphasizing what the first question was about: to really understand that the very opening lines of the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, declare this is the direct path to liberation. This is the direct path to the realization of Nibbana.

Just to clarify, Nibbana is not some heavenly space where you're going to sit back and simply enjoy. The clearest understanding of Nibbana, and I love this particular expression of it because it's so pragmatic, not metaphysical—the Buddha described Nibbana as the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion. When the mind is free from those conditioning forces. And so you can see that when you're practicing with that in mind, what we're practicing in each moment is to be with what's arising without clinging, without aversion, without delusion. Then we are actually practicing, you could say, temporary, momentary Nibbana. This makes it much more real rather than some kind of far-off abstraction.

A question came about the cause of dukkha—tanha—and the questioner said, "I think I'm outing myself as a striver perhaps. Tanha should be abandoned. What I'm starting to perhaps realize on some small level is that it's almost like not moving. The impulse to try to abandon is—I'm in the quicksand at that point in a way. I don't know

how to articulate it, but I think you understand what I'm trying to convey. And I guess I started thinking about kalpas. You know the old story about the bird with the silk over the mountaintop. Maybe that's how tanha is abandoned, in some more gradual style."

So the question is about the second noble truth, that craving is the cause of suffering, and the abandonment of craving—but how the mind can get caught up in the quicksand of efforting to abandon craving, which can just be another craving. And whether it's just this incredibly slow process. The Buddha described an eon, which is this vast amount of time—I forget how large the mountain was, but a large mountain, and a bird every hundred years just running a silk cloth over the top of the mountain. An eon is how long it would take for that mountain to wear away. So the question is whether that's what it's going to take to abandon craving.

Some years ago I actually had a significant shift on retreat, a shift in my understanding of the very question you're asking. For a long time in my practice, I saw the end of craving as the goal of practice. And I would practice, practice, practice, and maybe in twenty years or thirty years or ten lifetimes or an eon, I'll reach the end of craving. That was a little discouraging.

But in this particular retreat, in just reflecting a little bit about the Four Noble Truths and what they meant, I really understood that the end of craving can be understood and realized in each moment. It's not just about the final uprooting of all craving. The experience of the end of craving, the Third Noble Truth, can actually be present in every moment. There can be an end of craving in that moment, an end of craving in this moment—and that is a genuine realization of it, even if it's just for that moment.

One aspect of the teachings, and I'm glad we have the chance to talk about this because it can be a very immediate practice—one of the most common tendencies in meditation, and I've seen it in my own practice and working with yogis over all these years, is this very strong tendency to be leaning into the unfolding process. We're actually experiencing this mind-body as a process unfolding. We feel it in terms of the energy sensations in the body—maybe there's tension that is unwinding, or an emotion that's opening, or a breath that's going in and then out. The whole system we often experience as an unfolding. And because it actually is unfolding, we tend to lean into it. We're with this moment in order for the next moment, in order for the next.

Can you relate to this? That leaning into what's next.

At a certain point, I realized that this is exactly what the Buddha was talking about

when he talked about the second kind of craving. The craving for sense pleasures is obvious, but then the Buddha talked about craving for becoming. And I realized: yes, this leaning into the unfolding is really craving for becoming.

We're here, but we're wanting this moment *in order for* the next moment—as if the next moment will suddenly bring the resolution of everything. Even though the last ten million past moments have not. You'd think we would know it by now, but we don't. We keep thinking the next moment will resolve everything, or the next, or the next. And that is being caught on the wheel of samsara, the wheel of becoming.

When we see this, the practice—and this is something you can really work with—is to pay attention to that feeling of leaning into the unfolding, and then just drop back.

I'll give you an example. One of the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a very useful teaching, is: check the attitude in the mind. With whatever's happening, what's the attitude in the mind about it?

At one point I was just sitting here in the hall, simply feeling my breath. Completely simple—just feeling the breath, in and out and in and out. If you had asked me, "Is there any craving in this moment?" I would have said no, it's just feeling the breath. But then I remembered to ask that question: what's the attitude?

It was so interesting. Simply by asking the question—it wasn't even about the answer—simply by asking, "What's the attitude?" I could feel my mind relax back from a wanting that I didn't even know was there. In retrospect I saw that yes, I was with the breath in the most subtle way *in order to* get concentrated, *in order for* more calm. That slight leaning into becoming. Just by asking the question, I could feel the relaxation.

That moment is very instructive. This is a powerful refinement of the practice, because we can be quite mindful and quite concentrated in the unfolding and still be missing this craving for becoming.

As we've said in the hall a number of times, only six things are ever happening anyway. So what do we think the next moment is going to bring? It's just going to be another sensation, another sound, another thought. That's all that's ever going to arise. But our conditioning for craving is very strong.

One of the great beauties of dharma practice—and it's why it's so compelling, obviously compelling to all of you because you're here for this length of time—is that it opens us to so many different levels of who we are. It opens us to discernment of the kinds of thoughts we're having, to the different emotions, to seeing which are afflictive

and which don't cause suffering. It opens us to our bodies in so many different ways, feeling the different levels of the energetic system. It opens us to all the hindrances, and to the most subtle levels—like this subtle level of craving.

When we see that, there's ease in that moment of settling back, even if just for a moment. It's not something we should think, "Okay, now I've got it."

Just another story: I was on retreat at the Forest Refuge, reflecting on the Four Noble Truths. Craving is the cause of suffering. So I said, "Joseph, just stop it. If craving is the cause of suffering, just stop craving." It seemed so simple. It was just so funny because I really thought, "Okay, got it." And of course, a minute and a half later: "Oh, I wonder what's for lunch."

So it takes practice.

Conceit really is any form of "I am." Whether it's relative, whether it's comparing, whether it's what you described—just that sense of imagining how other people are perceiving you—I think that can all be classified as mana.

A couple of things, and Bonnie may have mentioned this in her talk, but I found mana one of the most interesting things to keep an eye out for. First, know that as the defilements go, this is the last to be uprooted. Mana is not uprooted until arahantship. So even after the view of self is uprooted, even after all desire and aversion is uprooted—which is pretty big in itself—this habit of "I am" is still there.

So first, make friends with it, because it is going to come up in a lot of different ways. At this point in my practice, I am delighted every time I see it. I see mana arise, and I just smile. First, because I'm glad to see it. I'd rather see it than not see it. *Ah, there you are.*

Second, when I see it, the seeing of it is enough. You don't have to do anything about it. Because in the seeing of it and being mindful of it, it's there and it's gone. It's impermanent like everything else. But in the seeing of it, each time I feel, "Okay, now I'm working on arahantship." Because this is the defilement. So that kind of makes me excited.

It's really helpful to emphasize the delight aspect in the mind from seeing the defilements rather than getting caught in judgment—either a judgment about them or a self-judgment about the fact that they're arising, which is just another way of sinking back into the morass. In the Buddhist texts, very often the comment will be, "Mara, I see you." I love that line. So every time mana arises, whatever form it is—ah, I see you.

It's totally delightful that you're all here, because this is such a great thing to be doing, even if you don't feel that all the time, which I'm sure you don't. There's a lot. We're just opening to the whole show. Some is easeful and some is really difficult; some is pleasant and some is unpleasant. But that is the practice—just the willingness to see it all. And it's tremendously liberating.

CHAPTER 21

# Creating a Concept of Self – Part One

Joseph Goldstein · 57 min


*In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein examines one of the Buddha's most counter-intuitive teachings: anattā (not-self) and the emptiness of self. While many Buddhist principles resonate with common sense—such as non-harming and the understanding that clinging to impermanent things causes suffering—the realization of selflessness challenges our entire worldview and offers the deepest liberation.*

*Drawing from the Abhidhamma's precise analysis of mind, Goldstein explains how consciousness operates through mental factors (cetasikas) and how the mental factor of perception (saññā) plays a crucial role in constructing our experience of reality. Perception recognizes, names, and remembers objects, creating the conceptual overlay through which we interpret our world. When perception operates without mindfulness, we become trapped by our concepts—mistaking the 'frame' for the 'picture,' as illustrated through vivid examples of misperception in daily life.*

*Goldstein illuminates how concepts of place, ideology, ownership, time, and self-image create immense suffering both personally and globally. He offers the Buddha's instruction from the Dhammapada to let go of past, future, and even present, crossing to liberation. The talk reveals how our sense of self arises from superficial perception of body, thoughts, and emotions—like seeing a rainbow without understanding the conditions that create its appearance. This is the first of a two-part exploration into understanding and freeing ourselves from the great illusion of self.*


So many aspects of the Buddha's teachings about the nature of suffering and the possibilities of freedom resonate with our own common sense understanding of things: the importance of non-harming as the foundation for living together, whether locally or globally; the understanding that all things in our lives are changing, and that if we cling to or grasp at that which in its nature changes, we suffer. These principles are not hard to understand, at least intellectually, even if it takes practice to realize them.

But there's one aspect of the Buddha's teaching that is really counter-intuitive, that offers a profoundly different way of understanding ourselves and the world. It's one that challenges our entire worldview. This is the deep understanding and realization of selflessness—anattā—emptiness of self, the insubstantiality of all aspects of our experience.

Realizing selflessness, realizing anattā, is the great liberating jewel of the Buddhist teachings. As our mindfulness and awareness of this mind-body process grows more stable and more precise, we find that the self, what we think of as the self, is not what we thought it to be. We begin to understand that the body is not self, that thoughts and emotions are not self, that even awareness or consciousness is not self. Gradually, as we settle into the practice, we begin to see that the self is a concept, a mental construct, a fabrication of our minds.

Sometimes when people even hear about this—no self—it may feel a little scary or create a little anxiety, imagining that somehow when this realization deepens, we go up in a puff of smoke and suddenly disappear. The mind can conjure up all sorts of ideas about what this understanding entails. But the experience of selflessness can actually come as a bit of a surprise, because it's so counter to our usual way of understanding things, and it can also come as a great relief. All those troubling aspects of our personality, and also all the good qualities—they don't belong to anyone. They're all simply appearances arising out of certain conditions, certain causes, appearing when those causes and conditions are there, and disappearing when the conditions change.

It's precisely because all of these qualities of mind are not intrinsic to a core self that we're actually able to cultivate those which are wholesome and abandon those which are unwholesome. If these were some intrinsic part of ourselves, we'd be stuck in whatever habit patterns are present. All of this was summed up by one teacher in a very pithy phrase: no self, no problem. And that is really true.

Tonight I'd like to speak about how the mind creates this concept of self, this deeply held view that we have, and also how we can free ourselves from this great illusion.

The Abhidhamma, the collection of teachings of Buddhist psychology, provides a very detailed, precise analysis of the mind and all the qualities in the mind and all the elements of the body. This Buddhist psychology offers a very useful vocabulary and framework for understanding how the sense of self is created and how we can see through it.

The Abhidhamma describes the mind as the faculty of knowing. Mind basically means consciousness, the capacity to know—knowing sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, thoughts, ideas. In its most fundamental meaning, mind refers to consciousness, that which knows.

But what we usually refer to as mind also means something a little more expansive than simply consciousness, than simple bare knowing. In each moment of experience, different qualities of mind arise—which in Buddhist jargon are called mental factors.

These are different mental qualities that arise in different combinations in every moment of knowing. In the knowing of a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, a thought, there's the bare knowing, which is consciousness, and then a variety of different mental factors in different combinations which color that moment of consciousness in a particular way.

The Buddha, with amazing clarity and brilliance, was able to see and recognize those factors of mind, those mental qualities which bring about happiness. He called those wholesome factors. He saw which mental factors arising in particular moments of consciousness create suffering, and he called those unwholesome. I find this very useful because it illustrates the pragmatic aspect of Buddhist ethics. What we're really doing is training in happiness. It's not a matter of following commandments. We see what factors bring about happiness—these are called wholesome—and we cultivate them. We see those which bring about suffering, and we learn to let them go.

So there's the simplicity of bare knowing consciousness, and in each moment this consciousness is colored by a variety of mental factors, sometimes wholesome, sometimes unwholesome.

There's one particular mental factor that is common to every moment of consciousness, always arising in every moment. It plays such an important role in the unfolding of our lives that the Buddha singled out this factor, along with vedanā—feeling tone—to be one of the five aggregates. When the Buddha was describing the totality of our experience in terms of the five aggregates, he singled out this one particular mental factor, made it its own aggregate, illustrating its importance. This is the mental factor of perception. The function of perception, the role that it plays in our minds, is to recognize, name, and remember each arising object.

So, for example, we hear a sound. Consciousness simply knows hearing—consciousness is just bare knowing. Perception picks out the distinguishing marks of that sound, and we name it "bird." We create a concept for it; we store it in memory. The next time we hear that sound, it's perception which recognizes, "Oh, that's a bird."

So you can see how perception is really conditioning our whole understanding of the world we live in. It's the way we construct and interpret our world through these concepts.

Perception can also happen on a pre-verbal level. Animals or infants, for example, may experience things through the sense doors and distinguish them and even remember them, but not necessarily have a word for them. So perception happens both on the verbal and pre-verbal level.

Just to reassure you, all of this is going someplace. This is just setting the stage. But it's important to set the stage to understand what follows.

When perception, this faculty of recognition, is balanced with mindfulness, it's like putting a frame around a picture. Why do we put a picture in a frame? In order to focus our attention so we can see the picture more clearly. The point is not to look at the frame. The point is to direct our minds towards the picture.

In the same way, when perception is in the service of mindfulness—and mental noting is really a function of perception, we're naming the experience with a simple note—that mental note, that perception, the point of it is to frame the experience so that we can be more mindful. It's focusing our attention on the nature of what's arising.

Here's where it gets interesting. When there is perception without mindfulness, which is our usual way of being in the world, we know and remember only the superficial appearance of things. We give a name or a concept to what arises, and then, without mindfulness, our experience becomes limited by that concept. It's like we're looking at the frame instead of the picture.

There are countless examples of this. A very simple one: go outside, look at a tree, we recognize it as a tree, we think that we're seeing a tree. But the eye does not see a tree. Tree is a concept—a useful one. The eye sees color and form. But we are so used to experiencing the world through the lens of our concepts. We recognize "tree," name it a tree—"Oh, look at that tree over there"—and we think that we're actually seeing it. And we are, in a superficial way. If we use the concept "tree" to focus our attention to really see, to really look, there is a whole world of experience that can be revealed: light and shadow and components. But that's only if we don't get seduced by the concept.

Here's another example of how concepts can limit our understanding. The son of a friend of mine was in grade school—it might have been second grade or first grade—and the teacher asked the class, "What color are apples?" My friend's son said, "White." The teacher said, "No, apples aren't white. Apples are red, or they're green, or they're golden." But this young boy was insistent: "No, no, no, apples are white." And the teacher was insistent: "No, no, they're red or green."

This went on for a while, and then, with great frustration, the young boy said, "When you cut open an apple, what color is it?" Of course, the inside of all apples—well, most apples anyway—is white. But we can get so caught by a superficial perception that we're not actually open to another view, and sometimes a deeper view.

So our perceptions, our concepts about what we're experiencing, this overlay on experience, very often condition how we feel about that experience. And one of the startling things about all this is that often our perceptions are inaccurate—and yet they're conditioning the experience we're having.

I'll give you two examples of this. One happened to me, and this is a story I've told many times, but it's so striking. It was the first time Sayadaw U Pandita came to teach here. This was 1984.

It was a very intense retreat. He's a very demanding teacher, and we were practicing really hard—he's big on heroic effort. So I was doing walking meditation just outside in front of the building, and I glanced up and saw him looking down at me walking. Lift, move—I started walking really slowly. I'm walking back and forth, and I glance up again and he's still looking. It feels a little strange to me, but I'm pretending to be diligent, all the while thinking, "Why is he watching me?"

This went on for some time, and then at a certain point I just stopped and looked up—and it wasn't Upandita at all. It was a lampshade. I had created this whole world with quite a lot of anxiety, all because of a concept.

Another time, a friend told me this story. They were building a house in the woods, and as they were constructing it, they saw some great blue herons flying around—such beautiful birds. Then the house was finally built, and they moved in and heard this chirping in the basement. They got all excited. Somehow they thought there was a nest with little blue heron chicks chirping away, and it made them so happy. Then one day they had some repairs done. Somebody came, went into the basement, came up and said, "You know your smoke alarm is broken." The chirping was just a broken smoke alarm. All of a sudden, the very same sound became so irritating, and they had to immediately fix it. It was exactly the same sound. One concept led to one experience; a different concept led to a different experience. This is happening all the time in our lives.

Now, I'd like to point out that these are kind of simple and in some way trivial examples, but the power of concepts plays a tremendously powerful role both in our own lives and in the world. Without attention to them, concepts can sometimes be the cause of tremendous suffering. This is not an insignificant aspect of the Dharma.

I want to mention some of the concepts that play such a critical role in our lives. Consider concepts of place. The world is divided into all these countries and states. How many wars, how many people have been killed over boundaries? The Earth has not created boundaries—these boundaries are mental constructs. It's very striking: those of you who can remember when the first astronauts went into space, many of them had

an almost mystical experience about seeing the Earth as a whole from outer space. They all described it as this most beautiful, unified planet. And yet we create concepts, create these boundaries, and kill each other over them.

Concepts of ideology. It's tragic how slogans—ideological slogans—can stir up so many people, sometimes in very violent ways. Just ones that are in the news over recent years: from one side, some countries are "the axis of evil"; from the other side, "the great Satan." These are slogans, ideologies, concepts that get put out, and millions of people get caught up in the emotions around them.

Concepts of ownership and possessiveness. This is a really interesting one. What does it mean to own something? Mark Twain, the great American humorist, once wrote a short story about horse traders in Russia, but he told the whole story from the horse's point of view. The horses never thought for a moment that they were owned by anyone. They were in relationship to various human beings—some kind, some cruel—but the idea of being owned did not arise at all.

Yet sometimes huge suffering comes about from investment in this concept. We look at the legacy of slavery in this country, the effects of colonialism—the idea that a person or a country can own other people or own another country. Now we see the effects of this still in the suffering and conflicts going on in this country and around the world.

Or on a much simpler level, if you think this is just out there somewhere, I'd like you to do a little imaginative exercise now. Imagine walking into the hall and finding somebody sitting in your seat. There would probably be a moment. You might not shoot them, but I'll bet there would be some kind of reaction in the mind: "What are they doing in my seat, in my place?"

So it goes very deep. The Buddha said we can't even be said to own this mind and body, much less anything else.

Now with all these concepts and further ones, I'm not suggesting that we do away with concepts or that concepts are bad, because all of these concepts have uses. We can use them skillfully. The concept of ownership can be useful, or the concept of place. But we have to understand that they are constructs of our minds. They are not reflecting some underlying reality. When we understand that, we're not so attached to them and we can use them in a skillful and appropriate way.

The next concept I want to talk about has huge ramifications. If we could understand this one, I would say—I'm going to make up some number—but perhaps eighty percent of your suffering would be eliminated. Maybe seventy percent, but some significant amount. And that is the concept of time: the concept of past and future.

How is it that we experience the past? How is it that we experience the future? We're sitting or moving about, and we have certain thoughts—memories, recollections, remembrances. We put a concept on this class of thoughts, "past," and then with some mental gymnastics we take this concept and throw it back behind us, as if the past is actually back there. We do the same thing with future. We have certain kinds of thoughts—imagining, anticipating, worrying, planning. We have this class of thoughts, put a concept "future" on them, and with that same mental agility, throw the concept out ahead of us as if the future is out there waiting for us. All this time, we are not seeing that our experience of past and our experience of future is happening as a thought in the present.

Now, I am not discussing the metaphysical nature of time. I'm talking about how we actually experience past and future. If we are lost in this construct, in this concept, it's as if we are carrying past and future as mountains on our shoulders going through life. How much of your day is spent lost in thoughts of past and future, with all the attendant feelings and emotions and everything that comes along with it? The concept of past and future is a huge burden we carry when we don't see that the actual experience is simply a thought in the moment. A thought in the moment is very light. It just arises and passes.

This insight does not require thirty years of meditation to understand. It can be seen in a moment. Retreat is a very good place to investigate this. You might keep an eye out for time thoughts about the retreat. You're sitting or moving about, having a really hard day. "Oh my God, three more weeks, nine more weeks, whatever it is, I'll never make it." And you feel depressed and heavy. Or maybe you're having a great time, about to get enlightened any moment. "Only three more weeks—I wish I could be here a year." In both cases, what has happened? There was a thought in the moment. That's all it was. But we created a concept, a time concept about it, and then burdened ourselves with everything we've invested in that concept.

This is hugely liberating to see. It doesn't mean we ignore those thoughts we're calling past or those we're calling future. We engage with them in the appropriate way, but we actually see that they are just thoughts in the moment. And so our engagement with them is immeasurably lighter. If past and future really exist, where are they? I think that's a good question to ask.

Now we're going to take this a step further, because it's not only time thoughts about past and future which are so prevalent and in which we get so lost—we also create a concept of present. This may seem strange, because so much of the instruction and teaching says, "Be present, stay in the present moment." But the present too is a

concept. It's possible to practice being in the present, but with a kind of fixation to the present. The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa said, "Live, you say, in the present. Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality."

It's a beautiful expression of something the Buddha talked about in the Dhammapada, and this is a very profound instruction. This is an instruction that could transform your entire practice. So take it in.

Let go of the past. Okay. Let go of the future. Okay. Let go of the present, and cross over to the further shore. With the mind wholly liberated, you go beyond birth and death.

This could be a very interesting place to explore in your practice. When you really are settled and in the present flow, just moment after moment, if it comes to mind, you might bring to mind: okay, let go of the present. What would that mental move be? It's a kind of letting go. It's basically letting go of clinging to the present. I call it channel zero—which is really the mind that is not clinging to anything at all. Not to concepts of place, of ownership, of ideology, not to concepts of time.

Another big category of concepts that you have been exploring and gaining a lot of insight into are all the concepts we have around self-images. We create a concept about ourselves, about who we are, and we present ourselves to ourselves in that way, and we present ourselves to the world in that way. And as soon as we have a self-concept, a self-image of any kind, it is already a limitation. It is already a contraction. It's as if we've poured ourselves into a mold and then wonder why we feel constricted.

It would be very helpful to keep an eye out for whatever particular self-images are arising, whatever self-concepts you're holding to. On retreat, one of the most common expressions of self-image is good yogi, bad yogi. When things are going well, I'm the world's greatest yogi. And when we're struggling, it's as if I've never meditated before—I'm the world's worst yogi. Then we get caught up in that self-assessment, and we project it onto others and think, oh, they're great yogis, or they're terrible yogis. Then we compare ourselves, and we're just lost in this world of self-image.

I really got caught by this in that first retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita in 1984. As I mentioned, it was a very intense time. People were practicing with tremendous determination. At a certain point, I noticed all the yogis who I thought were the really good yogis—they were moving so carefully—and I saw they had little notebooks, and they were writing things down. In my mind I thought, oh, Sayadaw gave them some secret instruction. He only gave it to the good yogis, and I must be a really bad yogi. I fermented in that for a while.

But then I noticed the yogis who I thought were being quite careless, who didn't look very mindful at all. And I saw they had notebooks too. So then I thought, oh, I must be such a good yogi that Sayadaw thinks I don't need one.

It was just at the end of the retreat that I found out Sayadaw didn't say anything about having a notebook. People were simply using them at different times to make notes about their meditation in order to report. It had no significance at all. And yet my concepts about it fed into this tendency to create a self-image and to compare.

That's just one example of innumerable examples. Keep an eye out. Really pay attention to whatever self-images you construct, you create, because they are simply a concept in the mind.

Concepts become limiting even about things that seem more fundamental, like age or culture or race. How old is your breath? Is anger or love or joy or delusion or mindfulness European or African or Asian or American? No, it has nothing to do with any of that. These are more fundamental realities.

Even the idea of race is a construct, seen to be a construct without any basis in science at all. It would be like creating the concept of race based on the color of one's eyes rather than the color of one's skin. There's no basis for that whole construct. And yet look at the immense amount of suffering that has been caused by people buying into that mental construct.

Now this is not to say that these concepts don't point to certain differences of experience. Because they do. There are different cultures, and I feel very differently at seventy-two than I did at twenty-two. So there are differences that are experienced, but if we get caught by the concept about them, it solidifies the sense of who we are, and we miss or overlook the underlying commonalities of all our experience. We fix the sense of ourselves and we fix the sense of who others are, all through this attachment to concepts—not realizing that they are concepts and constructs.

The deepest conditioning and habit of mind, and the root cause of so much suffering in the world, is the attachment we have to the concept of self, to this mental fabrication. The idea—and often it is a felt sense—that there is someone behind experience to whom it's all happening. We create a reference point for all of our experience, and then we call that reference point self, I.

So how does this happen? Because right here, if we explore it, we can see how and why the sense of self is so strongly conditioned. We become attached to and identified with this notion of self because we are relying on a superficial perception. It's like looking at the tree and thinking we're seeing tree, not realizing the tree is a word in our

mind. We get up in the morning, look in the mirror—there's Joseph, there's me, that's who I am—and then we don't look more deeply to actually see and experience what is really there.

An example that I think we've used at different times during the retreat is that of a rainbow. After a storm, a rainbow often appears and we see it and it's beautiful and we feel a certain delight. But if we have some strong mindfulness and wisdom, we not only see the rainbow, but we actually can see and understand the underlying reality of air and light and moisture—the conditions which create the appearance of rainbow. This allows us, when we see the underlying realities and not just the superficial perception, to delight in the joy of it, in the beauty of it, while at the same time not being attached to it, because we realize it is only an appearance.

So we might think of self—of Joseph, of each one of us—like a rainbow. There is a pattern to all the different conditions of mind and body that are coming together moment after moment, and we can recognize the pattern, we can name it, we can use a concept, and it's fine to use the concept self. But we don't want to become misled into believing that that concept refers to something underneath the appearance. And this is precisely our exploration in meditation: going beyond the appearance to see and experience all the changing elements of this mind and body. We really see, moment after moment, what it is that's actually arising.

So the question can arise: on the level of rainbow, or the level of self, we are seeing that, we are seeing the rainbow—is it real? Is the rainbow real?

One Tibetan teacher expressed a response to this question really clearly, with regard to the question of whether the self is real. He said, "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. But you think you're really real. You exaggerate it."

I love that. We are real and we interact in all the conventional ways we do. That's not wrong. But we're not really real in the way we think we are. And the practice of meditation is to open the doorway to that understanding.

How much of our sense of self comes from a superficial perception of the body? Our first response to "Who are you?" is often "This is me, this is who I am"—and we point to our bodies, because the body seems so solid and real. So in sitting, or in moving about, begin to notice how frequently we overlay our experience of the body with certain concepts: shoulders, back, arms. But we never feel the back. We never feel the arm or the

shoulders. There is no sensation called shoulder. There is no sensation called arm. What we're feeling is tightness or pressure or lightness or vibration. That's our actual experience.

But so habitually we overlay that experience with a concept and then identify: my shoulder, my back, my arm. How often would you say "my tightness" or "my pressure"? That hardly ever comes up. And yet very commonly we say, "Oh yeah, my shoulder, my back." For conventional purposes this is fine, but it is misleading. Because the concepts we use don't change—back today, back yesterday, back tomorrow. And because the concept doesn't change, we think that there is some underlying reality that doesn't change. Yet as soon as we go beneath the concept to the actual felt experience, we see the body as a changing energy field. We have a very different relationship to this experience that we're calling body.

I want to reiterate that concepts can be useful. We can use them in the service of mindfulness. Just as an example, one of the instructions early in the retreat was to use the phrase "there is a body"—to use it sitting and moving about. So we're using the concept "body," but what is the actual experience you have? When you drop in with "there is a body" in sitting or moving, the experience becomes alive—we're actually feeling the body as sensations in space. The concept falls away because it has focused us in the actual experience of what's being felt. So concepts can be useful, but we have to see that they're only a pointing.

A strong sense of self also happens, as you know, when we become identified with thoughts and emotions, with all the internal stories that we tell about ourselves and about the world. We've talked so much over these weeks about really paying attention to the empty, insubstantial nature of thought. I find this to be one of the most freeing, immediate benefits of mindfulness of the mind—of thoughts—when we look directly not at the content of the thought, but at the nature of thought itself.

As different thoughts come, you might hold the question: what is a thought? When you look at it so directly, you see there's not much there. And yet when we don't see it so directly, we live in this mind-created world. It's as if we're living in the dream of our thoughts, with all of the emotions and reactions that come along with it.

There's a story of a Zen hermit monk living in the mountains. He was a great artist and he lived in a cave. For whatever reason, he spent years painting in great detail a tiger on the wall of the cave. He was such a great artist and did it with such precision that when he finished, he looked at it and got frightened.

I love the mental note: painted tiger. When you're caught up in some story, in some train of thought, in some big drama, you might make the note "painted tiger." It's just thoughts arising in the mind, and if we can see them in that way, we're not creating a sense of self by identifying with them. The thoughts come and go, we learn from them whatever we need to learn, but there's no contraction, no constriction, no creation of self in those thoughts.

I'd like to end with a reading that is somewhat confessional, because it comes from one of my favorite genres—mysteries and spy books. But you never know where wisdom comes from. Generally these genres are looked down upon, however, I'd like to share some wisdom from a book called *Bangkok Tattoo* by John Burdett. It's about a Buddhist detective.

These are my closing remarks:

"You see, dear reader, speaking frankly and without any intention to offend, you are a ramshackle collection of coincidences held together by a desperate and irrational clinging. There is no center at all. Everything depends on everything else. Your body depends on the environment. Your thoughts depend on whatever junk floats in from the media. Your emotions are largely from the reptilian end of your DNA. Your intellect is a chemical computer that can't add up a zillionth as fast as a pocket calculator."

And even your best side is a superficial piece of social programming that will fall apart just as soon as your spouse leaves with the kids and the money in your joint account, or the economy starts to fail and you get the sack, or you get conscripted into some idiot's war.

To name this amorphous morass of self-pity, vanity, and despair "self" is not only the height of hubris—it is also proof, if any were needed, that we are above all a delusional species. We are in a trance from birth to death.

Prick the balloon and what do you get? Emptiness.

Take two steps in the divine art of Buddhist meditation and you will find yourself on a planet you no longer recognize. Those needs and fears you thought were the very bones of your being turn out to be no more than bugs in your software.

Yes. So you could think of our practice as debugging the software.

So let's sit.

CHAPTER 22

# Cutting Through Identification with Consciousness

Joseph Goldstein · 53 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein examines the deepest levels of how we construct and perpetuate the sense of self. Beginning with a teaching from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche about how the concept of an enduring self keeps us wandering in saṃsāra, Goldstein systematically explores identification with body, thoughts, emotions, moods, and finally consciousness itself—the most subtle and deeply rooted habit pattern of self-creation.*
>
> *The talk offers practical tools for recognizing how moods differ from emotions, drawing on psychologist Paul Ekman's research to help practitioners develop mindfulness of these often-overlooked mental formations. Goldstein clarifies the distinctions between consciousness (bare knowing), mindfulness (knowing that we know), and wisdom (what we learn from being mindful), providing a framework for understanding the Buddha's teachings on anattā (non-self).*
>
> *Particularly illuminating is Goldstein's exploration of two perspectives in meditation—the particle-like nature of experience (knowing and object arising moment after moment) and the field-like nature (vast awareness in which phenomena appear). He shares the account of Ajahn Mahā Boowa's final liberation, where even the radiant mind was recognized as "the ultimate counterfeit." Drawing from Zen teachings including the famous dialogue between Bodhidharma and Huike, and the Buddha's instructions to his son Rāhula, Goldstein offers the practice of recognizing "this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself" as a mantra of liberation, revealing that selflessness and love are ultimately the same realization.*

Last week I spoke of how different concepts—concepts of place, of ownership, of time, of self-image, even concepts of age and of race—condition the way we experience our reality. We live largely in the realm of our concepts, and to a large extent they overlay most of our experience.

We also discussed how the concept of self, which is the root cause of so much suffering in our lives—not only in our own lives but in the world—arises out of a superficial perception of our experience, a superficial perception of this mind and body. Guy elaborated on this quite beautifully in his talk on the five aggregates, on the emptiness of the aggregates.

The importance of understanding this is highlighted in a teaching by the great Tibetan master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. It really points to the heart of what we are doing here. He said, "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others too."

So that's our challenge, that's our task, and that's our practice.

Tonight I'll continue the discussion from last week of how the sense of self is created and how it's possible to free ourselves from this illusion, from this mistaken perception.

We talked about how the sense of self arises when we identify with the body, taking this body, as we usually do, to be I, to be mine. Who am I? This is who I am. It's our first and initial response. We talked about how we create the felt sense of self every time we get lost in or are identified with the thoughts in our minds—all the many stories we tell to ourselves, about ourselves, about the world.

We also create a strong sense of self when we identify with emotions and moods. This is where I left off last week. It's that strong felt sense: I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm discouraged, I'm excited. And the list goes on and on. Then we go even further. We go from "I'm happy" or "I'm sad" or "I'm depressed" or "I'm excited" to "I'm a happy person," "I'm a depressed person," "I'm a sad person." We build a whole superstructure of self on top of momentary changing conditions.

These emotions and mind states are often the most seductive aspect of our experience. It's what we most easily personalize. Even when we can get a sense, at least at times, that thoughts come and go and they're pretty fleeting, when there's a strong emotion in the mind, we often get very hooked by it, very identified with it. We take what's non-self to be self—one of the distortions or hallucinations of perception that Bonnie spoke of. We don't see that each of these emotions or mind states is arising out of particular conditions at certain moments, stays for a while in its various transmutations, and then passes away when the conditions change.

We don't see, when we're caught up in it, that it is love that loves. It's fear that fears. It's joy that joys. It's anger that angers. Each emotion arising out of particular conditions comes into being, expresses its own nature, and passes away. The "I" and "mine" are quite extra. We're adding that to this experience.

One way of beginning to break this very deeply habituated pattern of identification is to see repeatedly, over and over again, their impermanent conditioned nature. The Buddha spoke very directly to this. It was a very direct teaching. He said, "So indeed, these states, not having been, come into being. Having been, they vanish."

Regarding these states, here are the pith instructions: regarding these states—all of these emotions—abide unattracted, unrepelled, independent, non-attached, free, not identified, with a mind free of barriers.

Simple.

I love that line: not having been, they come to be; having been, they vanish. Who among you has not experienced that? This is not some esoteric truth that requires thirty years of practice to discover. We all know this. These emotions, these mind states—not having been, they come into being; having been, they vanish. We've been through this countless times. But we don't often reflect on this truth. We don't remind ourselves of it in the midst of some strong emotion. We become so seduced by the story and the feeling state that we lose sight of their impermanent nature.

It might also be helpful to distinguish moods from emotions so that we can recognize and be mindful of their difference, seeing each of them more clearly. There's a well-known psychologist named Paul Ekman who did extensive research on facial microexpressions. He was able to read the emotions occurring just by watching the often unconscious microexpressions that people made in conversation. In his book *Emotions Revealed*, he makes an interesting distinction between moods and emotions that I thought would be useful to share, as it can help us distinguish the two and open up perhaps a new arena of mindfulness.

He says, "This is a good place to distinguish emotions from moods. All of us have both of them, but they are different. The obvious difference is that emotions are much shorter than moods. Moods can last a whole day, sometimes two days, while emotions can come and go in a minute, sometimes seconds. A mood activates specific emotions. When we are irritable, we are seeking an opportunity to become angry." That's interesting—to really see how moods can activate or condition an emotion. "When we are irritable, we are seeking an opportunity to become angry. We interpret the world in a way that permits or even requires us to become angry. Another way moods differ from emotions is that once an emotion has begun and we have become aware of it, we can usually point to the event that caused it. Rarely do we know why we are in a mood. It just seems to happen to us."

I found it very interesting in my practice to begin checking in with the often unnoticed moods in the mind. They're much more amorphous than emotions, more ephemeral. They're often a background filter through which we view and relate to the world. Yet if we're not aware of them, they really condition our experience.

It takes a light touch to become mindful of moods. Because they're so ephemeral, we need to be very receptive. It's as if we settle back and open up and simply hold the question: what's the mood in the mind now? What's the general color tone of the mind? Not looking too hard. If we look too hard and try to find it too precisely, we look right through it to some experience. It's actually quite enjoyable to check this out at different times during the day. What's the mood now in my mind? And we remind ourselves that the mood, too, is impermanent and not self.

The thing is, we usually overlook this because we're waiting in our practice for some big emotion to become mindful of. In a way, we're intensity junkies. We like the intense experience, whether it's intense dukkha or intense sukha—that's what excites us. Moods are much softer and therefore often overlooked. But it would be interesting to include the mindfulness of moods in your field of awareness.

Sometimes I think of moods like cloud formations in the sky. Some cloud formations are heavy and gray and oppressive, and some are light and fluffy and airy. They make us feel different ways. But they're all just formations arising out of particular conditions. The conditions change, the clouds dissipate. Our moods and emotions are just like that, and it's helpful to remember and reflect on their impermanence. Can you even remember what mood you were in two weeks ago? Or one week ago? Or two days ago?

You know, when we look back, we already know how transitory our moods are. And yet when they come and we're not mindful, we can be so caught up in them, so influenced and conditioned by them. We become imprisoned in the view of self. "I'm feeling this way."

What's interesting is that as we begin to experience all of these changing phenomena in the body, of thoughts, of moods and emotions, we can see that there is a recognizable pattern to the unfolding. We wake up in the morning, we look in the mirror, and we recognize that person—looks familiar. It's not to deny that there's a pattern to this process, that things are unfolding in a lawful way, not in a chaotic way. Because of this, this arises. Because of this, this arises.

But the great insight, the liberating insight into selflessness, is the understanding that there is no one behind the process to whom it's happening. There's no core, central element that is "I." And yet, as we've mentioned many times in different talks, our ha-

bitual tendency is to refer everything back to this concept that we've created, this concept, this fabrication of self. My body. I'm thinking. I'm angry. I'm sad. I'm happy. Everything refers back to the self.

And then people often come into the practice with great determination to get rid of the self. They hear these teachings and they see that the whole problem is self—I need to get rid of it. I have very good news for you: you don't have to get rid of the self, because it is not there in the first place.

There was a writer—I think he was English or Irish—who lived in Hong Kong for a long time. He wrote under the name of Wei Wu Wei. Clearly from his writings, he had some profound experience of emptiness and selflessness. He wrote many books, and most of them just contain short aphorisms, very pithy statements of wisdom. I want to read a few of them to help relieve you of the burden of thinking that you need to get rid of yourself.

The first one is called "The Goose": *Destroy the ego. Hound it. Beat it. Snub it. Tell it where it gets off. Great fun, no doubt. But where is it? Must you not find it first? Isn't there a word about catching your goose before you cook it? The great difficulty here is that there isn't one.*

We need to relax into that understanding.

Another one of his little gems: *Whoever thinks that they exist objectively is like a dog barking up a tree that isn't there.* That's a great image—we're barking up this tree that isn't there.

And a last one: *What is the use of trying to climb out of a hole we have never been in?*

Our practice takes on a whole different tenor when we approach it from this understanding. There's not something we have to get rid of. There's not this big bad ego that somehow is there and we have to obliterate it. Rather, it's the understanding that it's not there in the first place, and we simply have to see how we are creating the felt sense of self in any moment that we're identified with what's happening. That's what creates that felt sense of it, and it's strong. But it's nothing more than a moment of identification with some element of the mind and body. And the more insight we have—for example, into the three characteristics, or even simply into the flow of impermanence—moment after moment, that weakens the habit pattern of identification.

All of this, I think, can be understood relatively easily, even though it takes practice, with respect to the body, with respect to thoughts, with respect to moods, with respect to emotions. But the most subtle level of identification, and the most deeply rooted

habit pattern of creating a sense of self, happens when we identify with the process of consciousness. When we are identifying with consciousness, with the knowing, then we're creating a sense of the observer, the witness, someone apart from experience who's knowing it all.

And even when we understand on some level that thoughts and feelings and emotions in the body are changing and impermanent, still we have the belief, "Well, I'm the one who knows all this." That could be said to be the last holdout of self. But through a growing mindfulness, through a growing wisdom, we see that consciousness and mindfulness and wisdom themselves are dependent on conditions. Consciousness, mindfulness, wisdom are all arising and passing in each moment.

I want to take a few moments to clarify some terms which often are confusing. In English, we use words as translations from the Pali, and in Pali, the terms are very specifically defined. But when they get translated into English—and perhaps other languages—the definitions sometimes are not so clear, and we can get confused.

The term consciousness refers to that knowing faculty. It's simply the faculty of bare knowing: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling, tasting, touching consciousness, consciousness of thought. One of my favorite examples of consciousness as being different than mindfulness—I may have mentioned this previously, but for me it's a wonderful image—are you familiar with Black Labrador Retrievers? For those of you who are not familiar, they're tremendously playful dogs. They are just having a great time, running and jumping and playing. It's great fun to be with them. They don't look very mindful, but they're not unconscious. They're knowing sights, particularly smells—they're knowing all these things. Consciousness is there. And I hope I'm not slandering them by saying they're not being mindful—it just doesn't look like it.

So mindfulness is something different than consciousness. Consciousness is just knowing the sense objects. Mindfulness—we can almost say mindfulness knows that we know. It's another level of knowing, knowing that the object is present. A very good experiment that reveals clearly in your experience the difference between consciousness and mindfulness is to pay attention to those moments when you come out from being lost in a thought. When the mind is thinking and we're lost in the thought, we are not unconscious—consciousness is there—but there is no mindfulness. And yet in the moment, and we have these countless times a day, we're lost, lost, lost in a thought, and then in a certain moment we become aware that we're thinking. Highlight that moment. Because right in that transition from being lost in a thought to being aware that you're thinking, right there the quality of awareness, the quality of mindfulness, is illuminated.

So then what's wisdom? Consciousness is just that bare knowing. Mindfulness is another level in which we know what the object is—we know that we're knowing. We might say that wisdom is what we learn from being mindful. Mindfulness brings us, as was mentioned, face to face with the object. So we're mindful or aware of sights and sounds and thoughts and emotions and moods. Mindfulness is the methodology of wisdom. We're mindful—what are we learning?

I think this is a really important question, especially given the widespread application now of mindfulness in our society. It's quite amazing. Mindfulness has become mainstream, and it's extraordinary. But mindfulness itself, although very beneficial on many levels, is not wisdom. Mindfulness brings us there. It brings us here to the moment. And then what are we learning? Of course, all of the Buddhist teachings are really an elaboration of what we learn when we're being mindful. We learn that everything is impermanent, and because of that, ultimately unreliable. We learn the selfless nature of things.

We learn the Four Noble Truths, how attachment leads to suffering. And this is not theoretical. Mindfulness actually lets us see all this in our own experience.

So that's a slight definition of terms: consciousness, knowing, mindful awareness, wisdom. Coming back now to how do we cut through the identification with knowing? How do we stop creating and living our lives from this place of being the knower, the observer, the witness?

This is a very challenging aspect of the practice—how to cut through identification with knowing, with consciousness. And there are different methods depending on the perspectives we have in our experience.

I want to use a little analogy which describes two different kinds of perspectives that we often have. You're probably familiar with the understanding in physics that depending on how it's observed, light can be seen either as a particle or as a wave. Seen in one way it's a particle, seen in another way it's a wave. And unlike light, this is the full extent of my knowledge of physics. But that example has been very helpful because in meditation, sometimes we are experiencing the particle-like nature of experience, and sometimes we're experiencing more the wave-like or field-like nature of experience. Both of these perspectives happen at different times, and we can cut through the identification with knowing, with consciousness, in each of these perspectives.

When we're experiencing things in their particle-like nature, what we're seeing is that in each moment there is knowing and an object. I move my arm—there's the sensations of the movement and the knowing of them. There's a sound and the knowing of it,

a sight and the knowing of it, a thought and the knowing of it. As we're paying attention moment after moment, we can begin to experience that in every moment this is what's happening. It's a pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

There are stages of insight, and one stage is called purification of view. This is precisely the view that is purified. It's the beginning understanding of selflessness—that there's not a self behind that process. All that's happening is this particle-like nature: knowing an object arising and passing moment after moment. At first, we're making some kind of effort to see this and to understand it. But as the momentum of mindfulness builds, the mindfulness of this pairwise progression of change is happening all by itself.

I want to read something from Ajahn Chah, a Thai master. He said, "At some point the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is simply seen as mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own."

It's as if we settle back into this process unfolding. There's no self to get rid of. There's nothing we have to get. There's nothing we have to become. We're simply settling back into the unfolding process that's happening all by itself. Knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. All is seen as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing.

This is helpful to practice, even if we practice it just for short periods of time. You might experiment—take a few minutes at a time and practice non-doing. Don't do anything. Don't be trying to do anything. Just settle back into the awareness of the already unfolding process. As we said, there are only six things that can be happening, so it's not that complicated. It's either a sight or a sound or a smell or a taste or a sensation or some mind object. Knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. And the whole process unfolds by itself.

This can have tremendously liberating consequences because we are experiencing the selfless nature of it. And this was again expressed beautifully from the Zen tradition by a Zen nun, the abbess of a monastery. Her name is Teijitsu.

She saw that experiences arose, abided, and fell away—that's what we're seeing all the time. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this. No ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she

held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind—I love that phrase, opened the clenched fist in her mind—and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

Do you see the difference in your practice between trying to get and settling back, letting this already empty process simply unfold? As the Thai master Ajahn Buddhadasa said, "There's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have."

Sometimes we settle back and we're seeing this particle-like nature—just arising and passing, arising and passing—and at a certain point it's all just going on by itself. But sometimes our experience reveals itself not so much as particles but more as a field. It's as if there's a field of awareness in which things are arising and vanishing. This is a little trickier in terms of not identifying with the field, with the field of knowing.

This is from the teachings of Mahasi Sayadaw, who was one of the great Burmese masters and the grandfather of one of the great lineages. He's describing how this mindfulness practice unfolds, and at different stages we're experiencing things in different ways. Sometimes, as I said, it's as particles, things arising and passing. Sometimes it's more like a field.

He said, "At times there is nothing to notice, with the body disappearing and the sense of touch lost. However, at this moment, knowing consciousness is still apparent. In the very clear open space of the sky, there remains only one very clear blissful consciousness, which is very clear beyond comparison and very blissful. The yogi tends to delight in such clear blissful consciousness. But the consciousness is not going to stay permanent. It too has to be noted as knowing, knowing"—whether it's noting with the word or just noticing.

So we need to become mindful even of that great, vast, spacious field of knowing. We need to be mindful of it so as not to be identified with it.

There was a great Thai master, Ajahn Maha Boowa, who is reputed to be an arahant, fully enlightened. And he is rare in that he actually described the moment of his awakening and the insight that completely freed his mind. I want to read this account of his final liberation. It happened to him—here's our chance.

"Once when I went to practice at this one particular temple, the problem of unawareness or ignorance had me bewildered for quite some time. At that stage, the mind was so radiant that I came to marvel at its radiance. Everything of every sort which could make me marvel seemed to have gathered there in the mind, to the point where I began to marvel at myself. Why is it that my mind is so marvelous? Looking at the body, I couldn't see it at all"—just as Mahasi Sayadaw described—"it was all space, empty. The

mind was radiant in full force. This radiance is the ultimate counterfeit, and at that moment it's the most conspicuous point. You hardly want to touch it at all because you love it and cherish it more than anything else. In the entire body there is nothing more outstanding than this radiance, which is why you are amazed at it, love it, cherish it, dawdle over it, wanting nothing to touch it—but it's the enemy king, unawareness.

"But luckily, as soon as I began to marvel at myself, to the point of exclaiming deludedly without being conscious of it, 'Why has my mind come so far?'—at that moment a statement of Dhamma spontaneously arose. This too I hadn't anticipated. It suddenly appeared as if someone was speaking in the heart, although there was no one there speaking. It simply appeared as a statement: 'If there is a point or a center of the knower anywhere, that is an agent of birth.'"

That's what it said. So in the midst of this amazing radiance that we love and that we cherish and that we've practiced for—if there is a point or a center of a knower anywhere, that is an agent of birth, of continuing samsara.

This is the critical point in our practice. As long as there is identification with anything at all, we are still in the realm of conventional conditioned reality. So how do we cut through? In this experience of mind or awareness or consciousness as this radiant field, which can be so seductive and blissful—how do we cut through?

How do we cut through identification with that?

In some Tibetan and Zen traditions, they have some very useful tools. One teaching suggests that we look for the mind. Look for the knowing mind. Can you find it? When we look for what's knowing, there's nothing to find. And as one teacher said, the not finding is the finding.

I like to do this sometimes in listening, because that's very effortless. Sitting and sounds are arising, and sometimes I'll pose the really unspoken question: can I find what's knowing the sound? It's clear that there's a knowing of it, but can I find what's knowing? In that looking for the mind and seeing there's nothing to find, it's a moment of cutting through any identification with anything, because there's nothing to find.

This is expressed in a very famous Zen exchange, a dialogue between Bodhidharma, who brought Buddhism from India to China, and the person who was to become his first disciple, Huike.

Huike says, "Please teach me the Dharma of all the Buddhas."

Bodhidharma says, "The Dharma seal of all the Buddhas cannot be obtained from someone else."

And you can feel the yearning and the anguish. It's said that Huike had waited outside three days in the snow for Bodhidharma to come teach him. He said, "My mind is distressed. Please pacify it with your teaching."

Now before I go on, this whole dialogue has a kind of Zen witticism to it, but that's not the point. There's a very profound teaching here, so see if you can take it in in that way.

Huike says, "My mind is distressed, please pacify it with your teaching."

Bodhidharma says, "Present me your mind, and I will pacify it."

Huike says, "I've searched for my mind, but I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There, I've pacified it."

When we see that—when we look for our minds and can't find it—it's already pacified.

I've used this dialogue often, not even on retreat. I can just be in my life and maybe caught up in some drama or other, and I realize that there's some tension or some suffering going on. Because I'm so familiar with the dialogue, all I need to remind myself is: already pacified. In that moment the whole thing disappears because it cuts through the identification with the knowing, with consciousness. I've looked for it everywhere and I can't find it. It's like that moment—there, already pacified. It's already done.

The Buddha gave some very specific and profound teachings to his son, Rahula, who ordained as a novice when he was a young boy, and then at twenty ordained as a full monk. This is the Buddha teaching his son. This teaching gets to the heart of everything we're doing and practicing. He said to Rahula, "Every aspect of mind and body should be seen with perfect wisdom. This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

We can use these words, these teachings of the Buddha to his son, as a kind of mantra of liberation. Whatever is arising, moment after moment—whether it's something in the body, in the thoughts, in emotions, in moods, in consciousness, awareness itself—this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.

And it's said in the sutta that whoever understands this, that nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine—whoever understands, whoever realizes this—has understood and realized all the teachings. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. This is what we're practicing.

We are actually practicing the mind of freedom, and we can do it moment after moment. We forget, we get carried away and get lost, but then we come back and begin again. I think it's very helpful to keep connected, even as we're going through our practice, to the actual potential for liberation in this moment, even if it's for just a moment. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine.

A surprising consequence of this—and Carol spoke really beautifully about this last night—is that through a growing understanding of selflessness, emptiness of self, we also develop a growing sense of connection. Because on the deepest level we realize there is no one there to be separate.

Again from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "When we recognize the empty selfless nature of phenomena, when we realize the empty selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

When we see this, we understand that selflessness and love are the same thing.

And this is our practice.

Let's just sit and let the words go into that unfindable space.

CHAPTER 23

# Big Mind Meditation

Joseph Goldstein · 41 min

> *In this guided meditation from the Three-Month Retreat, Joseph Goldstein leads practitioners into what he calls "Big Mind" meditation—a direct exploration of the open, expansive nature of awareness itself. This practice moves beyond focused attention on specific objects to rest in the spacious quality of consciousness that contains all experience.*
>
> *The meditation progressively deconstructs our ordinary sense of solidity and separation. Beginning with sounds arising and vanishing in awareness, Goldstein guides attention to body sensations appearing like "stars in the night sky"—not as a solid body with parts, but as points of feeling emerging in open space. The boundaries between inside and outside, self and world, dissolve as practitioners are invited to recognize that sounds, sensations, thoughts, and images all appear and change within the same empty, unobstructed space of mind.*
>
> *At the heart of this practice lies a profound inquiry into the nature of mind itself. Goldstein offers contemplative pointers drawn from the wisdom traditions: "Look directly at your own mind. It is, but it doesn't exist. It contains all things, but is not composed of them." This paradoxical pointing reveals mind as empty yet luminous, unfindable yet knowing all things. The meditation cultivates the recognition that there is ultimately "nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have"—all phenomena arise and pass by themselves in the open emptiness of awareness. This practice offers a taste of the unborn, unformed nature of mind that lies at the heart of liberation.*

This morning we'll do a guided meditation, somewhat in line with last night's talk. I call it the Big Mind Meditation. So dial up your big minds. It's really a very simple way of practicing that open, expansive awareness and looking directly at the nature of the mind, the nature of awareness, the nature of consciousness.

Sit comfortably, as comfortably as possible, settling into the awareness of the body just sitting. Let the mind open to the awareness of sound, not looking for any particular sound. Simply sitting at ease, sitting in the silence, becoming aware of whatever sounds may appear in this open, empty space of the mind. There may be loud distinct sounds, there may be soft background sounds, the sound of my voice, perhaps the sound of silence. Simply sitting at ease, aware of how all these sounds, distinct or indistinct, arise, appear, and vanish in the open, empty sky of the mind.

There's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have. It's all happening by itself.

Let the eyes relax, the shoulders relax, and the belly relax. Sitting quite at ease, simply aware of whatever sounds appear and change and disappear in the open empty space of the mind. Letting the mind rest at ease, simply being aware whenever sounds should become apparent, arising and passing in the open space of awareness.

You may also become aware of different sensations appearing, points of feeling like stars in the night sky, appearing and changing in the open space of the mind. There is no solid body, no head or shoulders, no back or chest or arms or legs—only points of sensation, points of feeling, appearing and changing in the open space of the mind. There is no inside, no outside, no boundaries, no separation. Only sounds, sensations, appearing and changing in the open, empty space of awareness.

Be aware of thoughts and images like clouds in the sky, appearing and dissolving in the open space of mind. There's no inside, no outside, no boundaries, no separation—only sounds, sensations, thoughts, and images appearing and dissolving in the open sky of the mind.

There's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have. Simply aware of sounds and sensations, thoughts and images, all appearing and disappearing by themselves in the open emptiness of mind.

Look directly at your own mind. It's empty, clear, without form, without color. Look directly at your own mind. It is, but it doesn't exist. Look directly at your own mind. It contains all things, but is not composed of them. When you look at the mind, you see nothing. When you look through it, you see the world. The mind contains all things, but is not composed of them. It is, but it doesn't exist. Empty. Open like space. Unobstructed. Without color, without form.

Look directly at your own mind.

There is no solid body, no head or shoulders, back or chest, arms or legs—only points of sensation, points of feeling, appearing and changing and disappearing in the open, empty sky of the mind. There is no inside, no outside, no boundaries or separation. Only sounds, sensations, thoughts, and images appearing and changing in the open empty space of awareness.

There's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have. All phenomena arising and passing by themselves in the open emptiness of mind.

Looking within at your own mind, it's empty, open, clear, and unobstructed. There's nothing to find. And yet it knows all things. It is, but it doesn't exist.

Look directly at the nature of your own mind.

Look at the mind and you see nothing. Look through it and you see the world. What is the unborn nature of this mind?

Look directly at your own mind. It contains all things but is not composed of them—empty, open like space. We look for it and it can't be found, and yet it knows all things.

There is no inside, no outside, no boundaries or separation. Only sounds, sensations, thoughts and images appearing and changing in the open emptiness of mind.

No solid body. No head or shoulders, back or chest, arms or legs. Only points of sensation, points of feeling. Some pleasant, some unpleasant. All arising and changing in the open space of mind.

Nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have. Only sounds, sensations, thoughts and images appearing and changing in the open emptiness of mind.

Look directly at your own mind—empty like space, open, unobstructed, without color, without form, without shape. It is, but it doesn't exist. It knows all things but is not contained by them.

Look directly at your own mind. What is unborn, unformed?

There is no inside, no outside, no boundaries, no separation. Only sounds, sensations, thoughts and images appearing and changing in the open, empty, space-like nature of mind.

When you look for the mind, you see nothing. Look through it and you see the world.

CHAPTER 24

# Q & A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h08

---

> *In this engaging question and answer session from a three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses a wide range of practice concerns with characteristic clarity and warmth. The discussion opens with an exploration of hardship's role on the path, reframing it through the lens of the Four Noble Truths—recognizing that dukkha itself, whether arising from austere conditions or simply from the nature of body and mind, becomes the very ground of practice.*
>
> *A central theme emerges around acting without attachment to outcomes, a teaching Joseph first encountered in the Bhagavad Gītā as a college freshman. He explains how passionate engagement with life becomes possible when we release our grip on results, since outcomes depend on countless conditions beyond our control. The conversation moves through subtle territory including the karmic weight of thoughts (minimal when mindful), the difference between wise discernment and aversion, and the stages of insight into impermanence—illustrated through the vivid metaphor of jumping from a plane, discovering there's no parachute, then realizing there's no ground.*
>
> *Practical guidance abounds: Joseph shares his transformative practice of acting on every generous impulse, discusses the precept of right speech as a powerful mindfulness practice (including the delightful Pāli term 'sampapalāpa' for useless talk), and offers a potent death contemplation—taking each breath as one's dying moment. Throughout, Munindraji's teaching resonates: 'Be simple and easy about things.'*

So any questions?

*What is the role of hardship on the path, or its importance? Because it seems to be such an integral part of training—for example, in Ajahn Chah's approach.*

In one way you could say that hardship is the total essence of the path, if you translate hardship as dukkha. All Four Noble Truths revolve around that—the experience of it, the cause of it, the ending of it, and the way.

Sometimes in thinking back to the practice conditions in Asia compared to the practice conditions here, there was a lot of relative hardship, just in terms of everything. Of course, I was much younger then, so it was easier. But as you've probably experienced,

external conditions do not have to be ascetic for hardships to arise, because there is the inevitable discomfort of the body and all the dukkha of the mind. So I don't think that much is lost in terms of the physical surroundings.

In whatever way we experience dukkha—certainly the physical discomfort, which is mostly what conditions in Asia were about, but which we also experience here just in our experience of the body—it teaches us a lot. It teaches us about patience. It teaches us about constancy and perseverance. It teaches us about selflessness, anattā, in that we see the body is ungovernable. We've talked a lot about this, the nature of the body. The nature of the elements is to express themselves in their own ways, and they often involve discomfort with a whole range of intensity.

In that sense, our relationship to discomfort—you could almost say that *is* the path, because it so clearly points out our own level of reactivity. As I mentioned the other morning, there's the Buddha's statement that as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. So our relationship to what's unpleasant, whether it's the physical surroundings and the kind of hardships that may have been there in Asia, or what we experience here—our relationship to that is the very essence of the path. Are we identified with it? Are we reactive to it? Can we be open to it as empty phenomena rolling on? Sometimes it's challenging. But for those of you who would like to explore that edge, there are always ways to do it, even in simple ways—following the eight precepts, perhaps sleeping less, things like that.

*How do you pursue things with passion in life without becoming attached? My experience is that when I get really caught up in a project or something that's meaningful to me, the further I dig into it, there ends up being fear, greed, jealousy, arrogance. At the core it feels good and right, but then it turns into something that becomes very sticky.*

There's actually a very simple answer. One of the phrases Munindraji would often use about the practice—he said this so many times—was: "It's simple but not easy." So the response to that question is simple but not easy.

I first connected with this understanding when I was a freshman in college. I was taking a course in Eastern philosophy and didn't know anything—I had no knowledge at all about Buddhism or about anything. We were reading the Bhagavad Gita, one of the great Hindu classics. There was one phrase in the Bhagavad Gita that even as a sixteen or seventeen-year-old who didn't know anything, resonated so deeply. I think it was kind of a harbinger of the rest of my life. It said: "To act without attachment to the fruit of the action."

Again, I really didn't have any clear sense of what it even meant, but something resonated deeply. I think that is precisely how we can act passionately, with full engagement—to see whether there's attachment to the outcome. Because we can't control the outcome. So many elements and conditions go into how things are going to turn out, and what we're doing is just one part of it.

If we're not attached to the outcome, then I think a lot of those unwholesome states fall away. We're just there, doing what we're doing, motivated by as wholesome a motivation as possible, and it frees the mind from so many unwholesome elements that can come in.

So it's worth looking. This in itself is its own investigation. As we're engaged, are we attached to the outcome or not? To really look at that on all the various levels of subtlety. And to remind oneself that no matter how worthy the cause and how passionately engaged we are, how things will unfold is ultimately out of our control.

To act without attachment to the fruit of the action, to the result of the action. And that doesn't mean we don't have an aspiration for a result, but are we attached to it? That attachment, like any other attachment, is simply the cause of a lot of suffering.

A question arose about karma, which is really defined as volitional activity—the volition, depending on the motivation, will bring about a certain result. It's easy to see this in certain kinds of actions, but difficult to see either how it's working or how we can become aware of it with regard to thought, the intention to think.

I think there are two elements here. To the degree that we become more mindful of thought, the karmic impact of simply having the thought is very minimal. So it doesn't need to be an act of concern. If we're having thoughts in the mind, even if they're quite negative thoughts, but we're actually mindful of them, that's like a line drawn in water. It doesn't really have much impact or bring about much result. The results become more powerful if we're not mindful of the thought and we give expression to them, either in word or in action.

That having been said, I think you can relax, at least with regard to the content, if you're mindful. So that can be another little motivating force—can I be aware of the thoughts that are going through the mind? There are times, and perhaps you've experienced it, when the mind is very quiet and there's not much thinking going on. There are times when we can actually pick up the moment just before we're about to think. That's quite subtle, and as I say, it's not necessary in terms of our karmic unfolding.

This is really important because one of the very seductive ways that we're not mindful of thought is when we are judging or have aversion to the content of the thoughts that are arising. We all have different kinds of thoughts—some are wholesome and beautiful, and some are not. And a common tendency is to see those unwholesome thoughts and, instead of simply being mindful of thinking, the habitual tendency is to judge those thoughts, to judge ourselves for having them, to have aversion towards them. It's precisely that which keeps us from being mindful that it's just a thought.

So you really want to be careful not to be judging the unwholesome content of thoughts that arise in the mind. The liberating relationship to them is not in judging them or judging ourselves, but in recognizing: it's just a thought. It's like a sound arising and passing. That's why practicing seeing the emptiness of thought as a phenomenon is so important. The content of the thought takes on greater importance when we act on them. That's when we really want to discern the wholesome from the unwholesome.

Another question arose: teachers have talked about the distinction between desire that's unwholesome and desire that's wholesome, but there hasn't been much discussion about the distinction between aversion that's unwholesome and aversion that's wholesome.

How do we distinguish between wholesome aversion and unwholesome aversion? In the texts, there are many mind states, like in the Pali *hiri* and *ottappa*, which is often translated—a little awkwardly in English—as moral shame or moral dread, fear of wrongdoing. The problem is that as we translate from the Pali into English, we could imagine that phrase, "fear of wrongdoing," to equate with aversion, because mostly fear is an aspect of aversion.

But actually, those mind states are not aversion. They are wise discernment and proper response to discerning wisely. We recognize: this is unwholesome, and there is that pulling back from wanting to do it. But that's not an aversive mindset. That's actually wisdom. And that's why *hiri* and *ottappa*—moral shame, moral dread, conscience, self-respect, there are so many different ways to translate them into English—are called guardians of the world. Those two mental factors are a protection. That self-respect, that we actually respect ourselves enough not to want to do unwholesome things that will cause us suffering, and conscience about not harming others—that's a very different mind state than aversion.

This discernment is really important. We could call it wise aversion. The Dalai Lama, I've read in certain places, talks about a wise fear. If you go to the ocean and you see a sign that says "dangerous undertow," there's a kind of wise fear. This would not be such a good idea to jump in.

But it's not really the fear of aversion. It's discernment.

A question arose about what to do when the insight of impermanence is in excess—when we see how all conditioned things are unreliable as a source of happiness, and yet the insight of anattā is not fully realized. We're personalizing it. We see the insecurity of it all and it can be destabilizing.

This could be a whole hour's dharma talk, so I'll start with just an image that describes various stages of opening to the impermanent unreliability of phenomena.

The example used was someone jumping out of a plane who at first experiences the excitement of free fall. People pay money to do that! So the opening to the impermanence of everything, the breaking apart of the solidity of things, at first can be exhilarating. It's like a whole new world begins to open up. Can you imagine the excitement of the scientists who first looked through a microscope and saw a whole different world than the world of apparent perception? Exhilarating.

So the person jumps out excited, exhilarated—but then they realize they don't have a parachute. That's when the fear, the anxiety, the terror takes place. This is a stage we go through as we open to the fact that there is no solidity to anything, but we're still not completely realized in selflessness. There's a lot of destabilization, and it takes a certain tenderness in the practice at that time to allow one to enter into that stage of understanding with balance, with care, with knowing that it's a difficult time. You're realizing: uh-oh, no parachute. At those times, particularly having some good dharma friends or teachers to be supportive in the understanding—yes, this is a stage in practice, but it's not how things remain.

The next level of understanding: jumps out, exhilarated, uh-oh no parachute, fear, anxiety—but then the person comes to the realization there's no ground. So the fact that there's no parachute doesn't matter because there's not going to be a crash landing. That's when the mind comes to a place of great equanimity where it's just phenomena rolling on and the mind is completely non-reactive to that, actually in a place of great peace and calm. There are these stages manifesting in this insight into impermanence. That's one whole way of understanding it.

Another template for understanding our life and practice is that the path is really—and the Buddha described this in quite a bit of detail—the path of happiness. The Buddha described seven different kinds of happiness. Just as an aside regarding the subtleties of the Buddha's understanding: Munindraji once gave a three-hour talk on twenty-one kinds of silence.

So even though we're developing insight into impermanence and the Four Noble Truths and dukkha and all of that, and at times it can be very challenging, the Buddha talked about the happiness of ordinary sense pleasures. They do bring us happiness. They're not long-lasting, but he didn't deny that happiness. And he talked about the causes for that happiness to arise, which is generosity and sīla. So there's a path to that.

He talked about the happiness of concentration. When the mind is concentrated and really comes to a place of stillness, that is a more fulfilling kind of happiness than the happiness of sense pleasures. We know that, even to a little extent. When you think of sense pleasures—no matter what they are, beautiful music, delicious food, passionate sex, mountain biking—we could enjoy the happiness of that for a couple of hours, for a day. Could you imagine having delicious food all day? Or listening to beautiful music for days on end? No. The capacity for the pleasure of even the most delightful sense pleasures is contained.

And yet Dipa Ma, this wonderful teacher, could sit in samādhi for three days. She could enjoy the happiness of that concentration. One time we were walking together in India and she turned to me and said, "You should sit for two days." She didn't mean a two-day retreat. She meant I should sit down and not get up for two days. I just laughed because it was unthinkable. She turned to me and said, "Don't be lazy."

Lest you have any projections, I did not sit for two days. But it is possible, and even to a lesser extent than that, we can experience the happiness of concentration for extended periods of time, which illustrates that it's a more fulfilling kind of happiness than the happiness of sense pleasures. And the Buddha talked about how to achieve that.

Then there's the happiness of insight, where we truly see with clarity the causes of suffering and manage, even for short periods of time, to unhook from a particular source of suffering. That's a tremendous source of happiness in our lives—to see that liberation is possible. And then there's the happiness of nibbana, the unconditioned. It just goes on and on.

So even as we're exploring the impermanence and instability, going through the various stages of that investigation, we don't want to lose sight of the fact that this whole path is a path of happiness. In our lives, we tune into that, and when we understand the causes for each of these kinds of happiness, we cultivate them. It's all of that.

A question came about three different expressions of concentration. One is khaṇika samādhi, momentary concentration, which we're really developing in vipassanā. There's access concentration, where the mind is in the neighborhood of jhāna, of absorption. And then there's the concentration of absorption itself. The question was whether these are different in nature or just different in intensity.

It's a little of both. Momentary concentration can get very strong. Sayadaw U Pandita—perhaps this was mentioned—really had a whole framework for understanding the stages of vipassanā. He called them vipassanā jhānas because at different stages in the development of insight, the level of concentration and the insights contained therein are analogous to the different jhānic states. So we shouldn't underestimate the strength of concentration that can arise in vipassanā, in momentary concentration.

In fact, access concentration, which technically refers to that neighborhood of jhāna, we can actually experience in vipassanā at that time when the concentration and mindfulness develop enough momentum that the practice is really going on by itself. We're not making a huge effort anymore to be mindful or to stay steady—it's happening naturally. This occurs in vipassanā, so there's an equivalent of access concentration there.

And then there is the absorption of jhāna. The Buddha talked extensively about jhānic absorption. Among contemporary teachers, there is a wide range of interpretation of what that state actually is, and different teachers offer very different descriptions. There's a book by Richard Shankman simply called *Samadhi*, where he describes this range of interpretation among contemporary teachers of jhāna.

In one sense, that full absorption is different, but again, there's a range of interpretation. The quality of concentration is really the same. Concentration means steadiness of mind. The example the Buddha gave in the texts—or perhaps it's in the Visuddhimagga where concentration is described—is a candle flame in a windless place. It's just that steadiness where the flame isn't flickering. This quality is being developed in moment-to-moment mindfulness, and there are times when the mind becomes very, very steady.

Another question arose about the first precept. Someone shared that this summer they killed a deer tick out of some fear, and this had come up during the retreat. They'd been working with forgiveness practice and such. But what arose was thinking about those times when one seems to need to choose to kill—what is the discernment there?

This is such an important question. In living as laypeople in the world, we are going to come up against situations where it seems that, in consideration of the greater good, it's necessary to take a life. What do you do with malaria-carrying mosquitoes? There are so many examples.

What's important here, I think, is really looking as much as possible at the motivation in one's mind and fostering wholesome motivations. Now, it may be that in the actual moment of taking a life—this is a possibility—there actually is aversion in the mind, and that's what's motivating the action. But that aversion could be surrounded by compassion, by discernment, by wisdom, by thinking of the greater good.

This is just my interpretation, but I think the karmic consequences of something like that are very different than if one is killing out of greed or out of anger or out of hatred or out of delusion. It seems to me a very different situation.

Let me tell you a sad story. After college, I joined the Peace Corps, and that's where I went.

They sent me to Thailand to teach English, which is where I came into contact with Buddhism. So it was a great transforming event. But in Peace Corps training, first the training was in DeKalb, Illinois in the winter—to go to Thailand. So just weather-wise the training was way off. But then the last two weeks we spent at a Peace Corps training camp in Hawaii, in Waipio Valley on the Big Island. Beautiful.

But part of the training, and it's remarkable to me that it was part of it, was that they had us kill chickens. Not everybody, but that was part of it. Most of us were going to teach English. But I was twenty years old, and I remember in my mind—this is a perfect example of the power of delusion—I had the thought, "I'm a man, I should be able to do this." That was the feeling. And even though there was a lot of distaste, I did it, and I had the picture of me proudly holding this dead chicken that I'd just killed.

Some years later, after the Peace Corps, I was in India doing intensive practice, and all of this came up. I mean, you think a deer tick is a problem. It's nothing. Not nothing, but... it was horrendous. I was just reliving that again and again. I was horrified at both how I could have done it and also the delusion out of which that action came. And I just sat with it. It was days, and it was a purification.

As I think was mentioned the other night, we've all done different unwholesome actions, and they do come up in the practice. But if we're able to be with it and to feel the remorse and the regret, it will have its own karmic consequences. Every time I get a neck pain, I think, "Okay."

And what's so interesting—what happened—did I tell the story? They would serve us, this was in Bodh Gaya, and I was practicing, and in the evening they'd serve just a very simple thing: tea and maybe a couple of chapatis and sometimes a hard-boiled egg. So in the midst of this coming up in my heart-mind in this incredibly vivid and distress-

ing way, they serve that. I crack open the egg and there's an embryo. This is the only time ever in my life that that happened, and it should happen when that's what was coming up. It's a little weird, but who knows how these things happen.

So again, that's something done just out of total delusion. That seems to me very different than when it feels like we have to take an action that may, at the very heart of it, have an unwholesome aspect, but with as much discernment and as much compassion as we have, we undertake it.

Ethical issues I find tremendously interesting. This is why the precepts—really undertaking the precepts as a training and a practice in our lives—is tremendously powerful, because it often brings us right to the edge of ethical dilemmas. If we've taken a precept not to kill, or not to lie, sometimes things come up. In the early years I'd be teaching in Canada, and just the visa question—it was so easy to just come in. "Why are you coming?" "Oh, I'm going to visit friends." I just didn't have to deal with the whole visa process. But at a certain point, it just wasn't the right thing to do, even though it caused a lot of what to my mind was unnecessary trouble and hassle and sometimes expense. Just to be straight, to be impeccable.

And I find as a life practice, striving for impeccability—we may fall down many times, and that's why the Buddha takes it on as a training rather than as a commandment. So it's not like if we fall down from impeccability that somehow we're a bad person, or sinful. No, it's a training. But having that standard against which to train, I think, is just an incredibly rich part of Dharma practice in our lives.

Someone in the audience commented that she practices the precepts as a training, and it's never perfect, never done, ongoing—and that the one she finds hardest of all is wise speech. Because as we all know, we speak, they speak, everybody speaks. It's an ongoing thing in the world, constant. More so than not killing.

It's not like isolated activities. Most of us are speaking for a good part of every day, except when you're here—which is, enjoy it. You will miss it. But it's precisely because of that frequency that right speech as a training can be an amazingly powerful practice of mindfulness throughout the day, because we are speaking a lot when we're off retreat.

To really pay attention to the motivation behind what we're about to say requires that we be attentive. And so to take that on—if we did that, just that, fully—I'm probably going to say something heretical here, but you probably wouldn't even need to sit in meditation. Because just that mindfulness of speech and really doing that throughout the day, taking it on, keeps us very mindful. I love that practice.

One of the parts of it that I really love is—you know, it's obvious and maybe a little bit easier to refrain from angry or harsh speech or lies, even though that can get subtle too. The one I really love to work with is useless talk. And the Pali word is perfect. The Pali word for useless talk is *samphappalāpa*. It sounds just like what it is—just samphappalāpa, samphappalāpa.

I love it because in a social gathering, a social situation, it's so easy. I see myself do this so often. We're just kind of hanging out with friends, and I can see an impulse arise in my mind just to say something that is totally useless, that really has no meaning at all. It's just a way of announcing, "Here I am"—as if people didn't realize that.

So I love it in those moments when I can see that impulse just to samphappalāpa, and I'm mindful enough to see it. No, I don't have to say this. It feels like this little victory over Māra. And it really feels like there's that sense of ease and letting go, kind of renunciate. We can taste the sweetness of renunciation in that moment. We're renouncing this useless speech. We just drop back into ease and silence.

The observation was raised that samphappalāpa in our culture is almost something you're expected to do—that you're sort of weird if you don't. Yes, yes. You cannot go to a party and sit totally weird in a corner. You've got to join. And that's the very funny point.

So the comment is that in our culture—and I think this is usual probably all over the world—social engagement often involves a lot of that. And so as a beginning undertaking, how about refraining from every fifth samphappalāpa? We don't have to create some kind of weird situation where we're never interacting on that level. But really take it in as a practice, recognizing that we don't have to say every thought that comes into our mind, even in social situations. And on rare occasion, it might actually be possible to elevate the conversation. We shouldn't discount that possibility.

But I hope you see—and I love talking about this because it just points to the fact that Dharma practice is not just about sitting on the cushion, although obviously we're here doing this and it's a very powerful form. Dharma practice is our lives. This is everything we do. Our whole life is Dharma practice. And so we really want to see and understand and refine ways of practicing, of bringing it into our life in all of these very ordinary ways and activities.

Someone asked about ways of practicing dāna in everyday life. There's a practice which I have tried to do and practiced actually for many years, which I have found to be radically transforming. And that is—and this goes back a long time now—that if I have a thought to give something, to do it. Not to second-guess myself.

Very often, and it's not that I'm purposely trying to have generous thoughts, although that could be its own practice. But this is more just paying attention to thoughts that are coming up in my mind. And if a thought comes to give in whatever way—whether it's material things or energy or whatever—a thought of generosity comes, act on it.

Sometimes it's really little things, and sometimes it's been really big things. Sometimes I shock myself. I do.

I have a thought, and then I think, "Whoa, am I going to do that?" But mostly I've tried to act on it, and it's been amazing because I have never regretted it. It always feels wonderful, and it's so intimately connected with metta, because in that act of generosity there's a very loving feeling present. So this could be a practice to undertake. And again, it's not something that needs to be undertaken in some rigid way.

Did I tell my house story? This is kind of a boundary on this practice. When we first started the center—it opened in '76—for the first thirteen years I lived right in the center, in the building. When I hit forty, I thought, "Okay, enough of this." I just felt like I needed to get out of communal living. There was a strong desire to have my own space. But I had very little money at the time, and a house was completely out of reach.

Then, with someone's amazing generosity—someone with great resources offered to build a house for Sharon and myself, which is next door. It was like a miracle, this great gift. So when I first moved in, I sat for a month on self-retreat in the new house. And I started having all these thoughts: "This is too nice. I shouldn't be living in such a nice space. Dharma teachers should be living... I don't know how they should be living, but not like this." I was feeling like I should just move out, give the house to the staff, build a hut in the woods.

But then I started thinking, "What's going on here? Why am I feeling this way?" And I saw that when I first moved in, I was embarrassed. That was the feeling—an uncomfortable feeling. And so I was trying to avoid it by thinking I would just give it up and move out. Then I realized I would much rather feel embarrassed than move out of the house. The embarrassment lasted a little bit, and it's long gone. I've really enjoyed living there.

So that's a situation where a thought arose—fortunately before I undertook this practice of acting on every thought of generosity. There might be certain boundaries to it, although maybe not. But this is a practice I have really found tremendously moving and powerful. And as I said, there's the whole range—just the impulse to do a little thing for somebody, to act on it.

*Question from the audience:* I've been exploring the precepts, and the second one in particular. For instance, I'll go out to my parents' place to visit them and then I'll ask for just about everything. "Is somebody expecting a phone call? I'd like to make a phone call." "Can I use the shower?" At what point is it useful, and at what point is it making things more complicated? Trying to be impeccable and trying to see—is this obsessive? Is this really useful and wholesome?

The question is about the second precept—not taking what is not given. He says when he goes to visit his parents, before doing almost anything he'll ask, "Is it okay to take a shower now? Is it okay to use the phone? Are you expecting a phone call?" So where does this practice become obsessive rather than a skillful engagement with the precepts?

I think in certain situations—and you could check this out, it would be an interesting conversation to have with your parents—

But in many situations, I think we even know intuitively and out of common sense, or we can check it out. Is there a presumption of things being offered? So you can make a general understanding with your parents. Yes, there's a presumption that the food is being offered and the shower is being offered. And so you need not badger them with these questions each time.

Even having that discussion could be the beginning of an interesting conversation with your parents. Of course, I don't know them and I don't know how they hold all of this, but it could open into a discussion about the precepts and about your interest in really following this precept. And you can even acknowledge—I could imagine this in a discussion like that with your parents—you might say, "I know this may sound ridiculous, but I'm trying to follow this precept and this is what I'm thinking about." So it just becomes very open and then put to rest.

One of Munindra's phrases, which he used so many times, was a kind of variation on "simple but not easy"—but this is a more general phrase about our relationship to things. He would say so many times, and I'm so grateful because it really established in me a basic relationship to practice and to life. He would say, "Be simple and easy about things." Just be simple and easy. We don't need to overly complicate. Even in a situation like this, you could approach it in a simple and easy way in terms of having the discussion.

Just a little story about Munindra and being simple and easy. He was a very quirky person with a very quirky personality, which was very useful for me because it really punctured the illusion about how great dharma teachers should manifest—because he didn't manifest in those ways. He was just quirky.

In Bodh Gaya, sometimes we'd be in the bazaar and he'd be haggling with the peanut vendors, the people selling peanuts. He was a great bargainer. When he was visiting here, we took him to a flea market. The vendors did not stand a chance. He came away with tons of stuff that he wanted to bring back to give away in India. These poor people had never encountered anything like him.

So in Bodh Gaya, he's bargaining for five cents worth of peanuts. And someone—I can't remember whether it was me or somebody else—said, "Munindra, you keep saying be simple and easy. What are you doing?" And he said, "I said to be simple, not a simpleton." So he was very engaged in the world in all his quirky ways.

The next question was about intentions that are not seen. The example given was that during a sit that's quite concentrated, when the bell rings, the hands will have moved or changed position without any awareness of it. Is this something to be simple and easy about, or is this really consequential?

I think there are many, many intentions that we miss. We miss many more than we catch because they're very subtle and they're happening all the time. I think what's interesting in that situation is knowing or having seen that retroactively, looking back. So then you might set the intention at the beginning of a sitting to keep an eye out for it, so that you're including this one kind of unseen intention and see if you can make the unconscious conscious.

I think we can do that not only in something as simple as a shift of the hand position, which is relatively inconsequential, but also in patterns of speech where we look back at something and see, "I completely missed the intention for this, and it was harmful." So then we learn, okay, let me set the radar for that one. And this applies to so many different activities of our life. That's what makes it interesting—because we really are then making the unconscious conscious.

Now, the mind is a great mystery, and the unconscious has been defined in many ways depending on the discipline—whether in psychology or neuroscience or whatever. There are probably many different ways of understanding what's called the unconscious. But what I found in meditation, in at least one respect, is that I really began to feel there's simply a threshold of awareness in the mind. Everything beneath that threshold is unconscious, and everything above it is in our conscious minds.

And what I found, and I'm sure you've found as well, is that as the mind becomes quieter and more mindful, that threshold changes. More of what was previously unconscious comes into the light of awareness. That's a really interesting development in our lives. This investigation of intention is one very simple example of that process.

A question arose about whether the Buddha, when he talked about consciousness as one of the five aggregates, was referring to this threshold of awareness. Consciousness is defined in Buddhist psychology very precisely as simply the knowing faculty. What I was describing just now almost makes more sense to think of in terms of the threshold of delusion, of ignorance—one meaning of which is "not knowing." When we don't know what's arising, that's the function of delusion in the mind. Consciousness is still there; we're not unconscious in that sense. But things are going on that we're not aware of. So I would see that as the threshold of delusion rather than consciousness per se.

A final question came about practicing with the reflection on death, which is a classical Buddhist meditation. There are many ways to do this. One particular way I found very interesting was to take a period of time—it could be five minutes or ten minutes—where with each breath, each step, or hearing each sound, you take it to be your dying moment. It's not that the mind is thinking about taking it to be the dying moment; it's to really drop into what that would be like.

It's amazing. Even for short periods of time, the mindfulness gets so vivid. How would you want to be when you're dying? If you're really in your dying moment and this movement is it, just dropping that in, in a completely effortless way, the mind becomes amazingly vivid. That's one approach I found really helpful.

As for having discussions about death and dying with people who don't want to engage in those conversations—I wouldn't. We can't force our interests or even our understandings on people.

Why don't we just sit for a couple of minutes and let all the words drop into the silence.

CHAPTER 25

# Understanding Doubt and Aversion

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein examines two of the five hindrances that the Buddha identified as particularly challenging obstacles to awakening: doubt (vicikicchā) and aversion (dosa). Drawing inspiration from the Buddha's enlightenment narrative—where "the mind of the great being was not moved" despite Māra's terrifying and seductive visions—Goldstein invites practitioners to investigate what has the power to agitate their own minds.*
>
> *Goldstein carefully distinguishes between skillful investigative doubt and unskillful skeptical doubt, describing the latter as "choosing immobility as a means of transportation." He explores how doubt manifests in practice—through questioning methods, comparing practices, or the deeply ingrained pattern of self-doubt rooted in feelings of unworthiness. Referencing teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Sogyal Rinpoche, he offers the insight that difficult feelings are "real, but not true," helping practitioners recognize these states without being defined by them.*
>
> *Turning to aversion in its many forms—anger, fear, irritation, grief, and the judging mind—Goldstein examines how these states arise as conditioned reactions to unpleasant experience. He explores the "honeyed tip" of anger that makes self-righteousness feel sweet while obscuring its poisoned source. With characteristic warmth and humor, he reminds practitioners that these hindrances are visitors, not intrinsic to the mind, and that working with them skillfully transforms them into vehicles for awakening rather than obstacles leading away from Nibbāna.*

In one description of the Buddha's enlightenment, he is sitting under the Bodhi tree with the firm resolve not to get up from his seat until he has attained full realization, full awakening. Just imagine coming into the hall, sitting on your seat, with the determination not to get up until you've achieved complete awakening. You can appreciate the strength and the power of his resolve.

As the night progressed, it is said that different forces of Mara—the embodiment of ignorance and delusion—appeared before him, appeared in his mind. There were terrifying visions of violence and very seductive visions of heavenly pleasures. And then one sentence describes the tremendous power, the transformative power of this path. It's one sentence which described the quality of the Buddha's mind as he faced these forces of Mara: "And the mind of the great being was not moved."

I just love that. All of this is arising in the mind—the terrifying visions and the seductive visions—and the mind of the great being was not moved.

This line can be the reference point for our own practice. In whatever posture we are, in whatever activity—sitting, walking, doing our yogi job, moving from place to place—we can look at what has the power to agitate our minds. How are our own minds seduced or moved by what is arising?

When we look, we see that this agitation, this seduction, happens on many levels. It happens on very obvious levels and it can happen on very subtle levels. We can get overwhelmed by strong emotions. We all know what that experience is like—an emotional storm takes us over and we're carried away by it. We can get lost in background moods. Maybe it's not a big storm; maybe it's just some mood arising in the heart, in the mind and body, and we're not aware of it. That becomes the filter on our experience. We can get lost in, get moved by, get identified with the various thoughts going through the mind—sometimes long trains of thought, sometimes very fleeting thoughts. But if we're not mindful of them as they arise, we get caught up, agitated by them. We can also get caught up by identification with consciousness itself. This is the most subtle form, and we'll be talking more about this in the coming weeks—how we identify with consciousness, creating the self in the knower.

The Buddha highlighted a number of these particularly seductive states, and it's essential in our practice that we learn to recognize them. Because they're very deeply ingrained habits of mind, habitual patterns in all of our minds. The Buddha recognized them and named them 2600 years ago, and we're still experiencing these very same states in our own lives.

We want to explore not only their nature—what is the particular nature of each of these states—but also, and what's of great interest, is to explore what makes them so alluring. Why is it that we get caught up in them again and again?

When we explore these patterns with mindfulness and with interest, we begin to see that it's not simply a question of our own personal difficulty or our own individual problem. We see that these qualities are first of all universal; they arise in all of us. And these difficult states are precisely the place where we can explore the possibility of freedom. We really can see, in both our becoming lost in them and becoming mindful of them, so directly the nature of ignorance and the nature of awareness, the nature of suffering and the nature of freedom.

This is not a question of Buddhist philosophy or theory. We're actually experiencing this in our own practice, in our own lives, and that is the beauty of being on retreat. Our experience is so direct and so immediate. If we have this attitude of interest and investigation, it's actually possible to become happy when these difficulties arise, because we're in that space of preferring to see them than not see them. Whenever the difficulties arise: "Oh, I'm glad I have a chance to see you, to explore you"—rather than simply getting lost in our habitual pattern.

This is a big shift in our practice, because we tend to be very self-judgmental when difficult mind states or afflictive emotions arise. But we can turn that to interest, to delight. "Oh, this is a chance to learn something."

The more we practice being mindful of these seductive, difficult mind states, the stronger and more stable our awareness becomes. If we know how to work with them, it's actually strengthening our practice, because we're developing that strength of mind that even in the face of storms—whatever they may be—or in the face of passing thoughts or different moods, the mind of the great being was not moved. We're actually practicing that for ourselves, so it can be tremendously inspiring.

Tonight I'd like to speak about two particular strong habit patterns of mind, and they're two of what the Buddha called—and you're very familiar with—the five hindrances.

I'd like to speak about doubt and aversion.

There are a couple of steps in working with each of the hindrances, with any of them. The first step is clear recognition. We really need to be able to see very clearly and to recognize the telltale signs of doubt and aversion—and the other hindrances as well—because they often come masquerading as something skillful. Mara is so tricky. Mara is the embodiment of delusion. One of these hindrances will arise and it will be masquerading as something wholesome. Unless we learn how to really see clearly, to see through the disguise, we get caught up more easily. So a big part of our practice is familiarizing ourselves with the signs of each of these hindrances, how they show themselves to us.

Now in English, the word "doubt" can refer to two very different mind states, so it can be a little confusing. There is a skillful kind of doubt—the doubt that is the opposite of dogmatic belief. It's the quality of questioning, of investigating, of seeing for ourselves, not believing blindly. We might call this investigative doubt, just so we know this is wholesome, this is a skillful state to arouse.

The unskillful aspect, in terms of terminology, we should perhaps call skeptical doubt. This is the quality of indecision or perplexity. It's like being at a crossroads and not knowing which way to go. The mind just goes back and forth: Should I do this? Should I do that? Should I go here? Should I go there? As long as this kind of skeptical doubt is strong, we don't go any place. That's why this particular hindrance, of all of them, is the most dangerous, the most harmful. It can bring our practice—and also our lives, because it plays out in our lives as well—to a standstill. We don't do anything. We're not even willing to act and make a mistake and learn from the mistake. The doubt is a plague.

It's interesting that in English there's the phrase "plagued by doubt," because it truly is a plague. With all the other hindrances—even with desire or aversion or sleepiness—we're still in the game. We may be going through a storm and it's unsettling or agitating, but we're kind of still in some way present for what's going on. In doubt, we've stepped out of the whole game because we're caught up in this perplexity, this indecision.

There's a wonderful line in the book *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. It came out quite a few years ago, but perhaps you've read it. He wrote: "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is like choosing immobility as a means of transportation." Not a very skillful choice. Immobility doesn't get us any place.

Although most of us here—probably everybody here—have quite a strong confidence in the Buddha's teachings (it's why we're here and why you're so committed to practice), doubt can still take some very particular forms in our meditation practice even when we have a lot of faith in the teachings. As we pay attention, we can learn to recognize more quickly the particular kinds of doubt that can arise for each one of us.

For all of us, for everyone who practices, it's inevitable that at certain times difficulties will arise. Maybe there's a yogi somewhere in the world who just sits down and ten minutes later is fully enlightened, but that's not really how it happens. There are lots of ups and downs, difficulties and challenges, and this is part of our practice. This is what the practice is. This is why it's called practice—we need to practice with these changes.

But if these challenges, these difficulties, are not understood correctly, if we're not seeing them correctly, then it can lead to a lot of doubting thoughts about what method we're using. We really question: What am I doing here? I'm sure in the course of your time here, at least once you will have the thought, "What am I doing here? What does sitting, watching my breath..."

or feeling a step have anything to do with all the suffering that's going on in the world? These doubts are going to come.

Or we might start comparing practices. Many of you have probably done different kinds of practices. And so you're sitting here and maybe some challenges come. "Oh, Sufi dancing is much more fun." Or "Maybe Tibetan mantras would have me in a state of bliss." So we start comparing practices.

Or even within this tradition. I've been teaching retreats where yogis really have driven themselves crazy with the doubt: should I do metta, should I do vipassana? There was one yogi on a three-month retreat—for the entire retreat, whenever he was doing vipassana, he thought, "Oh, maybe I should do metta." So I said, "Fine, do metta." And whenever he was doing metta, "Oh no, maybe I should do vipassana." It was classic. I have to thank him for being able to tell this story, because it is such a classic example of doubt. Should I do this? Should I do that? And we don't do anything. That's the difficulty of it.

Or maybe you're doing vipassana, quite settled in that. "Oh, should I do directed awareness? Should I do choiceless awareness?" So you're just feeling the breath and working with that, and then, "Oh no, maybe I should open my mind." And your mind's open. "No, no, maybe I should..." It's not that one is right and one is wrong, and there are actually ways of interweaving the two skillfully, but we really have to pay attention to whether we are understanding it skillfully or whether the mind is simply caught up in doubt.

This relates to what I was talking about this morning. Should I make a determined, heroic effort—really the warrior mode? Or should I be more relaxed in my practice, settle back, ease into things? At different times, different approaches will be helpful. The thing to watch for is if doubt is taking over when you're doing any one of them, and you just get confused. So perplexity or confusion is a sign—that's one of the signs that doubt is present.

Even more deeply ingrained than doubt about our practice is the very strong habit pattern of self-doubt. This is doubting our very ability to practice. We may have clear faith in the teachings and know what practice we're doing, but then as we're facing difficulties or challenges, we start to doubt ourselves. This is very common. "Am I doing it right? Am I doing this right? Maybe this isn't the right time. I have so much going on in my life. Maybe I'll come back next year."

Sometimes external situations can trigger self-doubt, feelings of not being good enough. "I'm not a good enough yogi." This comes when we begin to see really what's going on in our minds. I remember when I first began practice in Bodh Gaya with Munindraji. This was my first experience—most of you are much more experienced now than I was then. But when I first started practicing and I saw all the defilements in my mind, I would just go running to Munindraji. I didn't say this exactly, but it's what I felt: "I'm such a terrible person. Look at all of these unwholesome parts of the mind that are arising."

And in working with Sayadaw U Pandita, which was many years later, he had the very great skill—the expression—to push your buttons. He would just say things to push my button, to cause a reaction in my mind. One way or another, some comment about my practice or what was arising, and it would just trigger all this self-judgment, all this self-doubt. I remember going in for one interview. I had been there some time at that point.

I gave my report, and he just proceeded to list all of the defilements that were present in my mind based on what I had reported. By that time, fortunately, when he did that, I just started to laugh because it seemed so funny to me at that point. It took me quite a while to get there. But as soon as I was able to start laughing at it, he stopped doing it. It was amazing. The whole relationship changed. The interviews from that time on were never about pushing buttons, because by then I could take it more lightly. I could see it. Each one was a chance just to see, to learn.

So we really want to be very watchful of this kind of self-doubt. Very often self-doubt arises because we're personalizing what's impersonal. I'll give you an example. At the retreat center—we don't do it here—but during the long course, the three-month course, we post the interview sheets and they're in four-day cycles, with each day marked by another letter. The first day has the letter A before each yogi's name, the second day the letter B, and so on. Well, the yogis don't know what the letters stand for. And the D-day yogis, some of them would think, "Oh my God, I'm a D-yogi. I'm not an A-yogi." And all of this self-doubt would come up. Of course, it had nothing to do with their practice—all it indicated was the day on which they were scheduled for interviews. But our mind will just jump to these kinds of self-doubting conclusions.

When self-doubt is strong—and it is strong in a lot of people in different situations—this is not an uncommon pattern. It's not only a hindrance in meditation; self-doubt is a huge hindrance in one's life. It really becomes a debilitating force, always undermining us, keeping us from going forward. If we don't learn to recognize all of these kinds of doubt when they arise, they become self-fulfilling. Because doubt itself is a state of per-

plexity, of indecision, of immobility. So if we're not seeing it, not recognizing it, the doubt becomes self-fulfilling, and in fact our meditation and our lives do come to a standstill.

This is really a very important aspect of practice and of one's own mind and experience to investigate. The doubting mind, and self-doubt in particular, has an interesting description of its effect. It's likened to a thorny mind—a thorn that keeps jabbing. If you jab the skin with a thorn, it gets very irritated. Well, doubt is like a thorn jabbing the mind. And when it's strong, the mind gets irritated, gets discouraged. We really do start to give up.

Sometimes self-doubt can come from an underlying feeling which, in some people—not everyone, but not uncommonly either—manifests as a deep pattern of feeling unworthy. For whatever reason of our conditioning, that can become a deep pattern within us.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama said something very powerful about this when someone asked him a question on the subject. The question was, "I do not feel worthwhile as a person. How can I work on this as a beginning meditation student?" Well, this feeling arises not only for beginning meditation students. Sometimes that pattern is deeply ingrained. And this was one of the few times when I saw His Holiness respond to a question with such directness. He said, "You should not be discouraged. Your feeling of 'I am of no value' is wrong. Absolutely wrong. You are deceiving yourself."

This is a very interesting response. And Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who is a contemporary Tibetan Dzogchen teacher, offered a very interesting teaching about this. He tells a story of flying on a small plane somewhere in Nepal. It was very bumpy—the plane was going up and down, up and down—and a lot of fear arose, he said.

You probably have been in that situation sometimes—it can get a little intense, especially in a small plane. So he was telling that story, and then he said that at a later date, he was on another flight and it was perfectly smooth, but the same fear arose, conditioned by the first flight.

He became interested. Why is this fear arising? It's not bumpy now. He elaborates on this story, but basically he came to see and express his insight about this feeling of fear—which we can apply to unworthiness and many other emotions. He said it's real, but not true.

The fear was real. Unworthiness is real in the sense that this is the feeling that's arising. So it's not denying anything. When the Dalai Lama says you're wrong, you're absolutely wrong, you're deceiving yourself, he's not saying the feeling isn't there. It is there. The feeling is real in the sense that it's present, but it's not true. That's what the Dalai Lama was pointing to.

Because all of us—the very nature of our minds—have the potential even for Buddhahood, for awakening. So to feel that one is unworthy or not worthwhile as a person, we are deceiving ourselves. We're not seeing the real nature of our hearts and minds. Do you understand this distinction—real, but not true? We acknowledge, yes, this is the feeling, this is what's present. But we remind ourselves: yes, this is here now, but it's not true. This helps us extricate ourselves, step out from being lost in it.

The Buddha highlighted the importance of working with these different hindrances and difficult emotions, whether it's doubt or any of the others. And the Buddha is very straightforward here, as the teachings usually are. He said that when we attend to the hindrances, these difficult states, carelessly, they cause lack of vision, lack of knowledge, are detrimental to wisdom, tend to vexation, and lead away from Nibbāna.

When these states arise, if we attend to them carelessly, it has all these consequences: lack of vision, lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from Nibbāna. Given all that, it can make us wonder—why would we ever be caught up in them? They only have unskillful consequences if we get lost. So what is their power? Why do we keep getting lost or caught up in them? What is their allure?

We begin to see, once we recognize the hindrance that's there—that's the first step, clear recognition. Okay, this is doubt. So what is the allure of it? Why do we get fooled by it?

Doubt will come masquerading as wisdom. We hear this very wise-sounding voice in our minds, or experience some very compelling feeling in the body, and it all seems so reasonable and so true. It's very helpful to recognize—each one of us—the particular ways doubt arises for us, because it will be different for different people. We can learn to recognize its disguise.

Maybe it will come as a particular pattern of thought. Maybe certain thoughts will just keep arising: What's the point of doing this? This is useless. I'm not getting anyplace. Some other practice would be so much quicker. Aren't we already enlightened?

If it's through doubting thoughts, if a thought pattern is predominant for you, really pay attention. Every time you see that thought—that's doubt. That's doubt. But we need to recognize what the thought pattern is. As I say, it will be different for each one of us. Pay attention. If we can see through the disguise and recognize doubt—oh, this is just another thought, just another passing thought—then "Why am I doing this?" loses its power.

We see it as a thought. It comes and goes. There's no problem. It's only when it seduces us, when we believe it, that we get caught up.

Sometimes doubt will manifest not as a particular thought but as a mood—a kind of background mood. And moods are tricky because they're not strongly defined objects of experience. A mood is very amorphous, like fog or a cloud. There's no specific outline to a mood where you can say, "Oh, there it is."

So very often, moods are arising—there are pleasant ones and unpleasant ones, but those associated with doubt might be discouragement, or just feeling down, low energy. To be aware of a mood takes a little refinement in our skill, because we can't just point and say, "There it is." With moods, it's much more that we have to back up and become receptive.

When we are aware that a mood is present, I find it tremendously interesting because it is more subtle. Can I back up and just let the mood and the awareness of the mood emerge? It arises in awareness. So we're not trying to pinpoint it. And as soon as we become mindful of the mood, it no longer is the unconscious filter through which we're viewing experience. I'm sure you're familiar with that—when you're in a mood, everything is colored by it, because we're not seeing it as another arising experience.

Sometimes we become aware of doubt through certain feelings in the body. Some people are very body-oriented, and so maybe there's some feeling in the body that's telling us doubt is present. Just check out whether that's how it is for you. Maybe it's some tightness or contraction or stuckness—something. It may be a thought, it may be a mood, it may be a body sensation, but really investigate for yourselves how doubt manifests. Because it's only if you recognize the sign of it that you then have the opportunity to be mindful of it and to not be caught up in it.

Another mind state that powerfully conditions our lives, not only doubt, is the mind state, the emotion of aversion. We experience aversion in a lot of different ways. It takes many forms: anger, hatred, annoyance, irritation, fear, ill will, grief, the judging mind. All of these are forms of aversion. They're mind states conditioned by our reactions to what we find unpleasant.

This is the pattern of conditioning: something is unpleasant in our experience, and the conditioned reaction, the habitual reaction to what's unpleasant, unless we're really being mindful, will be one of these forms of aversion. We don't like it.

So as with doubt, we can learn to become mindful of all of these different expressions of aversion when they arise, and we have to learn to recognize them. Otherwise we just get caught up and are reconditioning that pattern.

Aversion often arises in some very predictable ways. There are lots of opportunities to observe this, to be with it. It's very easy to see aversion in relationship to pain, to physical pain. There are probably very few of you who, when pain comes, say, "Oh good, this is just a chance for me to be with it." Maybe at a certain point in your practice it might be like that, but the habitual reaction to pain is aversion. We don't like it.

It's unpleasant. And so when these unpleasant sensations arise in the body, as they will for everybody, we often feel the contraction, where we're pulling back from it, or we feel impatience or a sense of struggle with it. We just don't like what's happening.

When you're feeling some contraction in your energy system or you're feeling some sense of struggle—whether you're sitting and it's just kind of, you're struggling to let things unfold, or in the walking or moving about—that sense of struggle or that contraction is almost always a signal that aversion is present in the mind. And so it becomes a very good feedback for us. It's a chance: okay, let me look at this.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, this wonderful Burmese Sayadaw, has some very good advice. He says you have to accept and watch both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. You only want pleasant experiences. You don't want even the tiniest unpleasant experience. Is this fair? Is this the way of the Dhamma?

It's just the recognition that unpleasant experience is part of life. It's going to happen. Given the nature of the body, we all experience it. Pain is going to come at different times or different levels of unpleasantness. It is our practice. We need to practice settling back, opening to, relaxing into.

The ability to do that will be strengthened if we recognize when the aversion is there. Because probably the first reaction will be the aversion—dislike, fear, judgment, whatever form it takes. If we're not aware of that initial reaction, we can spend a long time in that reactive mode. So we need to see that, and then in the mindfulness of that, it's much easier to remind ourselves: oh, okay, not liking, not wanting. Take a deep breath. Okay, can I just feel the pain? Can I just be with it? And so we kind of coach ourselves back into a more mindful, relaxed relationship to it.

What's so interesting about aversion is that it's so deep. As many of you know, this is not uprooted until the third stage of enlightenment, until what's called non-return, anāgāmi. That's a pretty high level. It's said that Dipa Ma, our teacher in India, was at that level—a very high level of realization. It's only at that level that aversion is uprooted. So best to become familiar with it and to learn how to be with it skillfully, because it is going to be there.

With pain it's fairly obvious; we can see it. But what's so interesting is how many other situations arise where aversion appears, which are really quite ridiculous.

For example, aversion can arise when we think about a painful or difficult situation in the past. How often does this happen? A lot. We're reliving old experiences, some of which were unpleasant or painful. We're having these thoughts and images in the mind and then getting angry or upset. This happens to all of us. But what's really happening there? We're getting angry at a thought. The situation is not happening now. All that's happening in the moment is that there's a thought in the mind or an image in the mind, maybe a feeling in the body.

Munindraji, one of his great teaching lines—he was my first teacher—he said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother." It's a thought. The thought of anything is not the thing. It's a thought. But we often don't see that, and we just get caught up thinking that that's the reality in this moment, and then we're enmeshed in all of the reactivity. So we want to see this. This is common. This happens to all of us. But we can learn to be a little more attentive to it.

Even more ridiculous than that is getting angry or upset about an imagined, anticipated future event. It hasn't even happened, but we're sitting imagining something will happen and then we get afraid or angry. The mind is—from a certain perspective, and we're not always in this perspective—but from a certain perspective, we really have to be able to laugh. Because the mind does so many crazy things that cause suffering.

But the beauty of being on retreat, the beauty of being here—I've just come off retreat myself. I was doing a self-retreat for about five and a half weeks, so I'm very freshly imbued with the power of it. When people ask me, "How was your retreat?" I say a retreat is always everything. It's always everything. There was a lot of difficult, challenging stuff that came up, and then the mind would get really quiet and go to deeper places of understanding, and then...

But the beauty of the retreat is that you've given yourself this huge gift of this time of silence in this beautiful place. You have nothing else to do except to be aware. That's your job—just to be aware of whatever's arising. And by that, through that awareness, we learn how to be skillful with these difficult states. The aversion is going to come. Can we see it? Can we name it?

It is important to also realize that sometimes strong emotions, even anger, can be conveying important information. So it's not always that we just want to see it and dismiss it or let it go. Sometimes people get angry in the face of injustice. When boundaries—personal boundaries—are being violated in some unskillful way, sometimes the anger we're feeling is telling us that there's some action that's needed. The really important thing is, can we understand the message that's being conveyed about the situation on the retreat or in the world without being overwhelmed by the anger? We're taking the message but then freeing ourselves from the angry response.

The Buddha—again, all of his teachings are so direct. Even the things we've heard a million times, things we're so familiar with. One of the things I love about retreat is that we can hear the words that we may have read or heard many times, but when you're on retreat, sometimes they just go in in a new and transforming way. I'm sure you've had that experience at different times.

So when the Buddha said, "Hatred never ceases by hatred. It only ceases by love"—that's powerful. That's not how most of the world is operating. And so we have to see, even in the face of injustice or things that need addressing, can we understand it but free ourselves from the hatred, from the anger, and then act? Act out of love, act out of compassion.

With aversion, sometimes it's unnoticed. Sometimes there are other unnoticed emotions which are fueling the anger. If we're caught up in some kind of aversion, whether it's fear or anger, and we're looking at it, trying to be mindful of it, really investigating it, but somehow we just feel stuck in it—it might be helpful to look and ask, is there something else going on that I'm not seeing, that's fueling this like an underground spring feeding the anger?

I'll share with you one story. Years ago, I was teaching retreats for law students, lawyers, judges—the legal world. Very interesting. There was one third-year law student, and we were talking about anger and how to work with it. This one third-year law student said something really interesting to me. He said, "I need this anger and I need it so I don't have to feel the fear."

I thought, yes—using anger as a way of avoiding another feeling, because he had no idea how it was possible to be with fear in a skillful way. And to realize, to learn—and I've worked with this a lot—once we learn how to accept and be with fear, it's very possible to act right in the face of fear. It does not have to be debilitating at all once we accept it. But he didn't know that, and so his only response to fear was to get angry.

This is what I mean. Sometimes there's an underlying emotion, or very commonly under anger, maybe there's a feeling of hurt. We've been hurt in some way, hurt emotionally. If we don't open to that, if we're not aware of that, then it can be feeding the anger.

So what is the great seductive power of this? Why is it that part of us loves it? The anger makes us feel strong, energetic, powerful. Often the seduction of anger is the sweet feeling of being right—that kind of self-righteousness.

"Well, I should be angry because this person is doing this or that. Yes, I'm going to really be angry." Again, the Buddha's words: anger with its poisoned source and honeyed tip. It has a honeyed tip. Anger has that sweetness—the self-righteousness we feel, a kind of sweet sensation—but we're not seeing the poisoned source, the root of it: ill-will and hatred.

There are many ways of working with aversion and anger and ill-will, and I'm sure you're familiar with them. But mostly it's simply to be mindful when it's arising. We need to recognize it and not be seduced by that self-justification. "Oh well, I should be feeling angry." When we're lost in that kind of self-righteous anger—"I should be feeling this"—who's suffering? The other person's not suffering. We're the ones who are suffering. And yet we're holding on to it. It's like holding on to a hot burning coal. "I should be holding on to this." Meanwhile, it's burning us.

On retreat, we have a chance to see this. When anger arises, observe what your relationship to it is. Are you feeding it because of that tip of sweetness, not seeing what's really underneath?

Just one last subtlety with respect to anger and aversion—or fear or ill-will. One of the things that feeds and strengthens these states is our aversion to the aversion. If anger is there, or self-judgment, or fear, it's unpleasant, just as pain is unpleasant. And if we want to get rid of it, if we have aversion to it, pushing against it, that actually strengthens it. It's like two playing cards resting against one another—each one supports the other. So if there's ill-will or anger and then we have aversion to it, it just keeps both in place. It's like trying to get rid of aversion through aversion. Not very helpful.

We need to see if that's how we're relating. It's a common response. Pay attention, take a look, and say, "Okay, can I let go of that resistance to it and just experience? Oh, aversion feels like this. Anger feels like this. Fear feels like this." It's just another arising, passing mind state. And so we allow it to arise and flow through.

All of these hindrances are not intrinsic to the mind. They are visitors. They're all coming out of causes and conditions. They're not who we are. They don't belong to us. They don't define us. They're simply arising out of particular conditions. They will pass away. If we can learn to work with them skillfully, then these very hindrances become the vehicle for our awakening. If we don't deal with them skillfully, then as the Buddha said, they lead to vexation, away from wisdom.

I would like to close with just one line from the Persian poet Hafez. I love this: "Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets trying to find you."

That's really our practice. The Dharma—it's like the Dharma has heard our name. You're all here, and it has been running through the streets trying to find us. The more we surrender and engage in this amazing practice, the more we taste the fruit of so many different kinds of happiness.

Let's sit for just a few moments.

CHAPTER 26

# Morning Reflection

Joseph Goldstein · 18 min

> *In this morning reflection from the Forest Refuge, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of the most frequently mentioned factors among the Buddha's 37 factors of enlightenment: right effort (viriya). Drawing from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, which compiles the essential principles of awakening, he explores why effort appears more often than any other quality in these foundational lists.*
>
> *Goldstein acknowledges that for Western practitioners, the word "effort" carries problematic associations with striving and struggle. He references the Buddha's famous teaching to the monk Soṇa, who was a musician before ordination, about tuning the strings of a lute—neither too tight nor too loose. This metaphor illuminates the art of meditation: learning to recognize when our attention has become rigid and constricting, or when it has grown slack and dreamy. Drawing also from Tibetan teachings on the shortcomings of being either inattentive or over-attentive, he emphasizes that presence of mind should progress in a spacious, relaxed manner.*
>
> *As practical guidance, Goldstein offers a phrase from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10): "Be mindful, there is a body, to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness." This simple reminder—"there is a body"—serves as an anchor that allows practitioners to maintain a relaxed yet attentive awareness throughout sitting, walking, and daily activities. He closes with a memorable summation: the practice is being relaxed but not casual—fully present and connected with whatever arises, whether pleasant or unpleasant.*

First, I'd like to welcome all of those of you who just came on Saturday. For me, it's always quite amazing to come back and be teaching here at the Forest Refuge. I often don't come by here when I'm not teaching, and so every time I do, it strikes me anew. Just walking in on the grounds, the feeling of quiet and peacefulness is so tangible, even coming from the quiet of the retreat center. There's something quite special happening here. It's like entering into a field of peace. Of course, then one has to deal with one's own mind. However, the environment is very conducive for seeing what's going on. So I have a lot of mudita for all of you being here and having this opportunity to practice.

In the discourse which describes the last days of the Buddha, the Parinibbana Sutta, which describes the days just before his final passing and the circumstances around it—in that sutta there's a summary, one might say, of the basic principles of the teachings. It's like he includes the whole template for the teachings of awakening. In this are all

the familiar lists: the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Five Spiritual Faculties, the Five Powers, and the Factors of Enlightenment. So it's a compilation of all those lists, and they're called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. Basically, the Buddha is saying these are the qualities of mind that need to be cultivated, that need to be developed in this process of awakening.

Now, there's a lot of repetition among these different lists; many of the same factors are named in different lists. But the factor that is named most frequently of all is right effort, or energy. I think it's worth considering—we'll be talking a lot about this both in the talks and in the interviews—because in one way it's obvious that in order to develop anything, whether in meditation or anything we try to accomplish in the world, it takes the application of energy. We have to be motivated to put forth that energy. That's why it says that energy, viriya, effort is the root of all achievement, the root of all attainment.

I think one of the problems for us as people practicing in the West, at least now and here, using English as the medium, is that the word "effort" carries a lot of baggage for many of us. Often effort is confused with efforting or excessive striving. So this quality of effort or energy is something we really need to explore in our practice. Because if in fact it is the root of everything in terms of our unfolding understanding, we want to make sure that the root is both well established and strengthened, but is also healthy—a healthy root, which means that we're cultivating energy, cultivating effort in a skillful way.

This takes practice. This is not something that is immediately obvious or something that we hear once and then we have it. This attention to the quality of our effort in practice is something we need to be continually paying attention to.

The Buddha himself gave examples of this. The famous one, I'm sure you're familiar with, involves a monk who was striving too hard. His name was Sona, and he was not deepening in his practice because of too much effort. Sona had been a musician in his pre-ordained life, and the Buddha used the example of tuning the strings of a lute. If the strings are too tight, the sound won't be right. If the strings are too loose, the sound won't be right. It has to be tuned exactly right. That's what we're doing in our practice—we're learning how to tune the strings, the strings of our minds, the quality of right effort in our minds.

I want to read something which highlights this. This is from a Tibetan meditation master: "The teachings describe two shortcomings in practice called lack of attention and being over-attentive. In the former, lack of attention, one does not pay attention to the training and becomes lost in daydreaming." Familiar? Easy to do. "Being over-at-

tentive means to be preoccupied with keeping hold of the meditation to such an extent that it disturbs the state of samadhi, of concentration. The hectic attempt to be so present, so mindful, turns into a distraction all by itself. Of course, one should have presence of mind, but it should be allowed to progress in a spacious way, not in a constrictive or rigid manner."

The more open the sense of being mindful is, the more at ease it becomes, the more relaxed we are. This relaxed quality is very important.

So this is the art of the practice. In so many ways, meditation is a science of the mind, where we become very precise and clear about exactly what is arising, how one thing conditions another. It follows what one could almost call scientific laws, and we're discovering these laws of the mind. On the other side, meditation is also an art. We need the sensitivity of an artist. As we're paying attention, what is the quality of our attention? Is it too little? Are we just getting lost and distracted, carried away by our minds and daydreams? Are we too tight? Are we struggling? Are we trying so hard to stay with the object that we're constricting the mind? That also becomes a problem.

The art is learning to pay attention to this. And we will fall off on both sides. It's not that we're going to tune the strings perfectly one time and they will stay like that. It's not like that. We'll be too tight at times, so then we need to relax. We'll get too relaxed at times, and we'll see the mind just wandering—then we need to sharpen, need to bring things in a little closer.

I would very much encourage you to pay attention to this quality of right effort throughout the day. Keep an eye out. The signals will be very clear. If you find that you're lost in thought a lot and just daydreaming, then you know that the effort is a little too loose. You have to come in closer, feel the experience more intimately. If you feel as you're going through the day that you're just getting more and more uptight, caught in this sense of struggle and wanting, and the practice is not going easefully—which doesn't always mean pleasantly; it just means that the mind is easeful with whatever's arising, whether pleasant or unpleasant—pay attention. Too tight? Relax a little bit. Too loose, too relaxed? Come in a bit closer.

You become almost like the conductor of the orchestra of your mind. A little louder here. You can quiet down there. It becomes very engaging because we're paying attention in that way. This is very important. If we're not paying attention to this, we will find ourselves falling off for longer periods of time on both those sides.

Just one last beginning instruction, which most of you probably have heard me talk about many times. One way that I found helpful to enter into this balance—to at least give us some sense of what it feels like—is using a phrase found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Foundations of Mindfulness, where the Buddha says: be mindful "there is a body," to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness.

I love the simplicity of that. Be mindful, there is a body, to the extent necessary for clear knowing. It doesn't take a lot. We don't have to struggle. There's a body. We just recognize: oh yes, there's a body. To the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness—which suggests that we want to practice this continuity through the day.

I found that using that phrase, "there is a body," is a very helpful way of settling into the practice, both in sitting and in walking. That phrase is not meant as some ultimate statement of truth—there is a body on some metaphysical level. That's not what it's about. The phrase is simply a reminder to settle into the simple awareness of the feeling of the body, whether sitting or walking. "There is a body" brings us back.

With that frame—there is a body—then in a relaxed but attentive way, you can become aware of whatever is arising within that frame. You may be aware of the body breathing, the sensations of the body breathing, wherever you notice them—at the abdomen or the nose or the chest. There's no need particularly to zero in on the breath, although one could do that. It's also possible to keep the bigger frame of "there is a body" and within that, the awareness of the body breathing, keeping the mind relaxed in a slightly more open way.

Within that frame of "there is a body," maybe sounds will appear, or different sensations, or thoughts, or images. But you're holding the frame—there is a body—and then simply being aware of whatever else is arising moment to moment.

If you find that the mind is wandering and going off a lot, you can either come back—"oh, there's a body," so simple—or you could narrow the focus for a while and just feel the sensations of the breath. Then when the mind feels a little more stable, you can open up again: "Oh, there is a body," being aware of whatever arises.

There's this wonderful interweaving of the quality of our attention and how we're paying attention, both in the sitting and in the walking, throughout the whole day.

The last little mantra, which sums up everything: the practice is being relaxed but not casual. Relaxed—settled back, open to what's happening—but not casual, not where the mind is just half-hearted. We're really there in each moment with whatever's arising, pleasant or unpleasant. Very relaxed, very open, and very present, very connected.

Relaxed, but not casual.

CHAPTER 27

# The Radical Truth of Impermanence

Joseph Goldstein · 53 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein examines the transformative power of directly perceiving impermanence (anicca) as the key to understanding why mindfulness leads to liberation. Opening with the Buddha's bold declaration from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) that this is "the direct path" to Nibbāna, Goldstein addresses a question particularly relevant in our era of secular mindfulness: How does simply being aware of breath, body, and mind actually lead to the highest freedom?*
>
> *The answer lies not in mindfulness as an end in itself, but in using awareness as a vehicle for investigation (dhamma-vicaya). Drawing on teachings from Suzuki Roshi, Ledi Sayādaw, and Buddhadāsa, Goldstein guides practitioners to move from intellectual understanding of change to intimate, lived experience of impermanence at increasingly refined levels. He introduces the practical concept of "NPMs" (Noticings Per Minute) to illustrate how concentration deepens our perception of change, and offers the Buddha's teaching on the two arrows to show how we add unnecessary suffering through resistance to what is already passing.*
>
> *Perhaps most powerfully, Goldstein invites practitioners to test the Buddha's words directly: when truly perceiving the flow of change, check whether the mind is clinging; when not clinging, notice if it is agitated. This personal investigation reveals what Buddhadāsa called "momentary nibbāna"—the coolness available in each moment of non-grasping. The talk concludes with reflections on mortality as an antidote to complacency, reminding us that liberation depends entirely on our own efforts to see clearly that all phenomena are simply "empty phenomena rolling on."*

The Buddha opens the Satipatthana discourse—the four foundations of mindfulness—with a very bold and unambiguous statement. He says, "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana, the highest peace. Namely, the four foundations of mindfulness." Pretty straightforward. This is the direct path.

An obvious question which follows is: how does this path of mindfulness—feeling our breath, feeling the body, feeling different sensations or thoughts and emotions—how in fact does it lead to liberation? What's the process by which it leads to the highest peace, to the highest freedom?

I think this question has particular relevance these days when secular mindfulness is so widespread. Mindfulness is amazingly popular and to good effect. But in the more secular context, it's not really held with the aspiration of liberation, of freedom. So as we're practicing, following the Buddha's instructions, it's helpful to keep in mind what the purpose of doing the practice is.

What are we learning from being mindful? We really want to be using the quality of mindfulness to understand how our minds are working and to free the mind from the deeply habituated forces of greed and attachment, of anger and hatred and fear, to free the mind from the sleep of delusion and ignorance.

In order to actualize this potential, I think it's very helpful to remember that we're not practicing mindfulness as an end in itself, although it has a very beneficial aspect in and of itself. But it is also leading us someplace much deeper and much more profound. The Burmese Sayadaw Uttachanir pointed to this when he said, "Awareness is not enough." It's the vehicle, it's the means, but by itself it's not enough. We need to use this great power of mindfulness, of awareness, of being aware of what's arising moment to moment without grasping, without greed, to be aware of what's arising without resistance, without aversion, without pushing away. And we do this in order to investigate what is true. We're using mindfulness as a skillful means for investigation.

One of the simplest and most profoundly transformative avenues of investigation—and investigation is really just another word for the wisdom factor of the mind—is a growing and increasingly refined awareness of impermanence. Investigation or wisdom is what illuminates the mind so that we can see clearly.

There's a little story that many of you may have heard of a student of Suzuki Roshi's. He was a Japanese Zen master, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center back in the 1960s. The student said to Roshi, "I've been listening to your lectures for years, but I still don't understand. Could you please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?"

What's the one phrase of Buddhism that will reveal all?

Everything changes. That was Roshi's response. Everything changes.

The implications of that simple statement are enormous. Although we all know that everything changes, this is not a hidden truth. This is not some special, mystical, esoteric truth. You can go up to anybody on the streets and ask them, "Do things change?" Everybody will say yes. We all know this. But we need to go from an intellectual under-

standing of it to the level of a direct, ongoing, intimate, lived experience of change as it's happening. That's what our practice is about. Can we bring the awareness right into this flow of changes so that we know it from the inside?

When we can do this, when we can really deeply and truly see the truth of change, it has great consequences. Over time, from seeing the change, directly perceiving it as it's happening, what happens is that our hearts and our minds relax. We let go of so many kinds of struggle and suffering.

We can see this so clearly with our aging bodies. Even though it seems like some of us are aging more quickly than others, we're actually all aging at the same rate. Some are just a little further along than others.

If we're attached to our bodies staying a certain way, when they change—as they always will for everybody, whether through accidents, through illness, or simply through aging—if we're attached to them staying a certain way, we suffer. It's so obvious.

But it's quite different, and often very difficult, to see that these natural changes are not a mistake. We understand that they're not a mistake for other people. It's just so interesting to observe our own relationship to our own changing, aging bodies and to see the changes that take place. Because even though we know on so many levels that this is just how it is, deep inside there's some place that wonders: did I do something wrong? If I were really on top of things, it wouldn't quite be happening like this.

So we have to be investigating and seeing and reflecting over and over again, because this habit pattern of attachment to wanting things to stay the same goes very deep. It's almost on an unconscious level. Obviously, we haven't done anything wrong. This is just the nature of things. This is the nature of life. This is the nature of the Dharma. This process of change, of growth, decay, and death—this is just the normal cycle of what happens. It is the nature of things. It happens to everyone. It happens to everything.

So if we can use mindfulness of what's arising in the service of clearly seeing impermanence, that's the point of being mindful—so that we can see that whatever is arising, it's changing, and it's always changing. The more we see it, the more repeatedly we see it about everything, gradually it deconditions that habit pattern of clinging, of attachment, of grasping, because we're seeing the process of change so clearly and so deeply.

What's particularly worth noting is this: for some strange reason, we're not only attached to holding on to the pleasant. We also have habit patterns of holding on to what's unpleasant. In some way, we hold on to our suffering. How often do we justify to ourselves feelings of anger or hatred or jealousy or envy or pride? We justify them to

ourselves, thinking, "Well, I should be feeling this because of whatever circumstances"—forgetting that we're the ones who are suffering in them. These mind states are like a burning in the mind. Why should we hold on to that suffering?

The more we see, the more repeatedly we see the impermanent nature of it all—the impermanent nature of all these emotions. They arise, they're like cloud formations in the sky; the conditions change, the clouds disappear.

Mindfulness and investigation of what's arising shows us, with each experience that we're having, that we have a choice. The Buddha used a quite famous example, I'm sure you're familiar with it—the example of the two arrows. We may have some unpleasant experience arise. It could be an unpleasant sensation in the body, a painful sensation. It could be a painful emotion, a painful external situation. So that's the first arrow, and that's a kind of dukkha. We're experiencing the unpleasantness of it. But the second arrow is how we're relating to that unpleasant experience. Do we hate it? Is there fear? Is there resistance? Are we adding suffering to suffering? The second arrow is up to us. No one makes us relate to our experience in a particular way.

This is really important, because as long as we think that someone else is making us feel a certain way, making us be with our experience in a certain way, we are handing over all our power. How we relate to what's arising—whether it's in the body, in the mind, in the world—how we relate to what's arising is totally up to us. This is tremendously empowering. We have a choice.

Just as an example of a choice with regard to how we relate to thoughts—I was talking about this this morning—thoughts come and go all day long. One choice, which is often made mechanically, unknowingly, is we just get carried away by them. We get lost in them. We create a whole little mind world, a mind drama, until we wake up. Another way of relating to them is again expressed by Suzuki Roshi. I just came across this.

He said, leave your front door and your back door open. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Just don't serve them tea.

Can we remember that? It's so amazing, the seductive power of the world—it seduces us again and again. What's remarkable is that when we look back at our past experience, we can see and feel so clearly the ephemeral, passing nature of it all. The experiences we had a year ago, or a month ago, or yesterday, or this morning, or five minutes ago—where are they now? In the midst of them, we get so caught up, so entangled. Yet when we look back at all our past experience, we know—this is not theoretical—we know for ourselves that they're totally gone.

But here's what's so amazing: when we look ahead, even though we know that looking back it all seems so empty, so ephemeral, so insubstantial, we become entranced by all the different possibilities, whether pleasant or unpleasant. We can be looking ahead with desirous anticipation or looking ahead with fear, forgetting that whatever experience will come will soon be past, just like all the others, dissolving into that arena of empty, ephemeral phenomena.

Why do we know this looking in one direction and forget it looking in the other? Looking back we know it; looking ahead we forget. This is worth noticing—how for most of us, we are continually looking ahead to what I call the next hit of experience. We're looking forward, leaning forward, anticipating, thinking about it. It could be the next event in our lives, the next day of work, the next project, the next relationship, the next problem or difficulty we might be facing.

On retreat, the same thing happens as in the world. The mind is looking ahead—maybe to the next meal, the next sitting, the next walking, even the next breath. We're just sitting here feeling the breath, but we're with one breath leaning into the next one. Again, we forget that whatever we're experiencing or want to experience will also soon be past. There's nothing there really either to want or to hold on to.

Now, the great paradox of spiritual life is that as objects of wanting, as objects of desire, all of these changing experiences of life leave us unfulfilled. This is obvious—they leave us unfulfilled because they don't last, and so they are incapable of creating lasting fulfillment. But these very same experiences, which as objects of desire leave us unfulfilled, as objects of mindfulness become the vehicle of our awakening.

This is important because it means we're not, in the practice, pushing things away. It's not that experiences are bad and that we shouldn't be having them. Rather, it's about learning deeply to not hold on, to not cling.

Liberating insight into impermanence comes in so many ways and on so many different levels, because everything is part of this process of change. We can see it in science—from the birth and death of galaxies, of clusters of galaxies, of stars. They also take birth, exist for some time, and pass away. All the way down to the smallest scale, the subatomic particles.

I want to read something about just how quickly things are changing on the most fundamental level of material existence. It said that capturing the motion of an electron within an atom seems like an impossible task, not least because the shuffling, the changing between orbits or escaping the nucleus, takes just attoseconds. An attosecond is a

billionth of a billionth of a second. That's pretty quick. To put this in perspective, an attosecond is to a second what the blink of an eye is to ten billion years. That's the difference. Undaunted, scientists have found ways to operate on such infinitesimal scales.

We have this notion that the world is solid and stable, yet things are changing at the rate of a billionth of a billionth of a second. Our quest for ultimate stability is doomed. It's not that we can't find relative stability—we all know that. But we really want to understand that on the most fundamental level—physical world, material world—there are huge, rapid changes happening all the time. That's what makes up our world. So obviously, our ordinary perception is not picking up change at that level of rapidity.

Most of us, maybe. Some of you may.

But I think we all know from our meditation experience that as mindfulness and concentration get stronger, we do begin to perceive change on more and more refined levels. It's what I call NPMs—Noticings Per Minute. For beginning yogis, the NPMs are quite low. When people are just learning and training, maybe there are ten noticings per minute. But as we practice, those NPMs go way up. We can really begin to discern in a very refined way the rapidity of change.

Even in the ordinary experiences of our meditation—in a breath, in a step, a sound—so many things are going on. Just when you listen to the sound of the bell, how quick are the vibratory elements of that? Sound is not one thing. Very rapid changes, which we can perceive. We simply need to pay attention to it.

Or think of times perhaps when you went to a movie and got caught up in the drama and all the attendant emotions—feeling happy or sad or whatever it is. But is there really anybody up there who's falling in love or getting chased or dying? No. All of that is an illusion created by the rapidity of change. All that's happening are pixels of light on the screen changing very quickly, creating an appearance, and we get seduced by the appearance because we're not seeing the change.

So our practice, the point of developing mindfulness, the point of developing strong concentration, is to enhance our ability to see the changing, impermanent nature of everything that's arising—so we don't get seduced by the story. This is not to suggest that we don't engage with the ordinary aspects of life, because we do. We relate to one another as human beings, not as infinitely rapidly changing aggregates, even though that's what's really happening. We relate in a conventional, hopefully harmonious way. But if we have also seen on a deeper level what's happening—and we can in our meditation practice really see and feel that this whole mind-body is a rapidly changing en-

ergy system—if we have touched that directly, something shifts. This doesn't require being a super yogi to feel. It may take some time to drop into that level of stillness, but this is within the realm of all of our capability and capacity.

As we settle in, as the concentration gets a little bit stronger and mindfulness a little bit stronger, we do begin to feel this flow of changes. And because of that, even as we engage with the ordinary conventional world, we are less caught by it. We see, we have a deeper understanding. We don't so easily fall into suffering and reactivity.

We can be developing our awareness of impermanence on so many different levels, and they all feed one another. In retreat we can develop it very clearly in our meditation practice, our formal practice where we're watching things just arise and pass. But we can also develop and refine our awareness of impermanence in very ordinary ways. It comes from paying attention to impermanence in ways that we already know but often overlook.

When seeing impermanence becomes the perspective through which we're looking at our experience, everything around us is revealing it. We see all the changes in nature. Just the huge issue of climate change—that's on a big scale. On a more daily scale: New England weather. One day it's freezing, a snowstorm. Next day it's seventy degrees. It's always changing. There's no stability.

On a societal level, when we look in a historical way, we can see impermanence in the rise and fall of whole civilizations. I think I've mentioned in different talks, some years ago I read a biography of Genghis Khan. I think he lived in the thirteenth century. He ruled practically all of Asia—a completely powerful, dominant person influencing millions and millions of people. How many of you thought of Genghis Khan today? I'll bet none of you did. So even people with that enormous impact—

Whole civilizations rise, become powerful, and pass away.

It's wonderful now that the weather is nicer—some of you may be walking in these woods. The New England woods are filled with miles of stone walls and old stone foundations. They didn't just appear. People built those stone walls. People built the stone foundations of those houses. People whose lives were as vivid and compelling as our own. And now what's left? We walk through the woods and there are some stone walls and some old stone foundations. Where are all these people now? Where are all those stories now? What remains?

And then we look even closer—not just externally. We look closer at the changing experience of all our relationships, our work, our bodies and minds. We see that everything, on every level, from galaxies to subatomic particles to historical events to the events in our own mind and body—everything on every level is disappearing and new things arising moment after moment.

After the talk, try a little experiment. When you leave the hall, just in the few minutes it takes to go from where you're sitting to leaving the hall, see if you can pay attention to the enormous flow of changes that will take place simply in that short distance. The changes of sensations as you go from sitting to standing. The changes of sensation as you begin walking. The sensations of the movement. The different sights that appear and change as you move. The different sounds that are arising. Perhaps the thoughts that are passing through your mind. In this short distance, the NPMs can be quite high if you're paying attention.

It's not that these objects are so subtle. It's just that we generally overlook them. It becomes so ordinary. "Oh, the talk is over. Go out and do some walking." We simply are not paying attention to this experience that is unfolding every single moment. Things are arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing.

The more deeply we perceive impermanence, the more continuously we perceive impermanence, the less we cling, the less we suffer.

Here is the Buddha's description of the liberated mind. He said, "In seeing impermanence"—when we are really in the perceiving of impermanence—"the mind doesn't cling. When the mind doesn't cling, it is not agitated. When it's not agitated, it personally attains Nibbana."

That's straight out of the suttas. I think it's very helpful to hear those words. For years I read them, and I always took them as a description. "Oh yes, when the mind doesn't cling, it's not agitated. When not agitated, it attains Nibbana." But it was only recently, in the last couple of years, that I thought of that phrase differently. Instead of taking it as a description, I took it as an instruction.

So I began to look for myself—not just to say, "Oh yes, that's how the Buddha described it," but rather to make the experiment for yourself. When your mind is really seeing the flow of change—and it could be in something as simple as just taking a step, you're taking a step and feeling the changes—at those times when you are actually perceiving the flow of change, check to see whether your mind is clinging or not. You're testing the Buddha's words. Is this true for me?

It was very revealing. When the mind is really perceiving the flow of changes, and I look back on my mind, it wasn't clinging—because it was perceiving the change. And then I did the next step. Okay, it's not clinging. I looked back on the non-clinging mind, the experience of it, and I asked myself, "Well, when it's not clinging, is it agitated?" Again, not something just to believe. We want to see in our own minds whether this is true.

What I found was that when my mind was not grasping, it was not agitated.

So we get a taste in those few moments. We really get an experiential taste, an experience of what non-clinging feels like, and then what non-agitation feels like, because we've seen it. And then in non-agitation, we really can get the sense—it may not be Nibbana itself, but we can get the sense that it's in the vicinity of Nibbana.

Buddhadasa, who was a Thai monk from southern Thailand over the last century, had a very unique approach, and a lot of his teachings are collected in a book called *The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*. He put things in very simple, direct ways—he was really quite a masterful teacher. He talked about these moments of coolness, of non-agitation, as momentary nibbana. He used the example that evidently in ancient India, the term nibbana was used conventionally to refer to something that had cooled down. They used it, for example, when rice was cooked and then had cooled—it was "nibbanad." Buddhadasa's point was that we can have many, many moments of this momentary nibbana, momentary coolness throughout the day, but mostly we're not paying attention. We just miss it because we're not looking, we're not appreciating that non-agitation of mind.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, when it talks about the hindrances, it says that we should be aware of when the hindrances are there and when they're not there. Mostly we give emphasis to when they're there—whether it's desire or anger or sleepiness, whatever. But it would be very helpful to check in throughout the day, because many times the hindrances are not there. We want to recognize that coolness of mind. Oh, the mind is still now. The mind is calm. The mind is not clinging. The mind is not agitated. Don't overlook this.

This becomes very apparent and could be a signal for you to check in: when you remember to take times to really be seeing the impermanence, the flow, and you're perceiving that, then all of these states will be revealed—the non-clinging, the non-agitation, the coolness. I cannot overemphasize how important this is.

Ledi Sayadaw, who was one of the great Burmese masters living around the late 1800s and early 1900s, was both a great meditation master and a great scholar—an amazing, amazing monk. He said that not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance. Not seeing it is ignorance. While seeing all phenomena as impermanent—actually seeing it, not just thinking about it—is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening.

This is not some little thing. Our refinement and our practice of seeing the changes that are happening all the time, on every level, inside and outside—we don't have to look far to see impermanence. We just have to be paying attention, because it's already happening. That is the nature of things.

Again, this is the Buddha's teaching from the Dhammapada: "Fully knowing the arising and passing of the aggregates, the five aggregates, one attains joy and delight. For those who know, this is the deathless."

The instruction is very clear and very simple. This is not complicated. But very often, particularly in the midst of our busy lives—though it can happen here as well on retreat—it's very easy to become complacent. We've all established certain habit patterns in our lives and in our meditation. We kind of get into a groove of how we meditate, just following along in that groove. We can get complacent, not actually arousing the interest, the investigation, to be seeing the impermanence. It takes a certain activation of interest, an activation of energy.

But there are some reflections and observations of obvious truths which can help to jolt us out of complacency, that can really help to wake us up. Probably the most obvious and most ignored reflection—this is so obvious—is that the end of birth is death. The end of birth is death. Our life is just getting shorter and shorter and shorter. We are all in the queue. We are all in the line, and it's only going in one direction. But how often is this really alive for us?

In the great Indian classic, the Mahabharata, one of the sages makes the comment that one of the most remarkable things in the world is that we see people dying all around us, but we don't think it will happen to us. We know intellectually that it will. But how vital is that understanding in how we live? Do we really have that understanding? How alive is the understanding of death?

This is a powerful reflection. The Buddha gave some remarkably short and pithy instructions for how to reflect in this way, and they're ones that I have found genuinely helpful. Again, it's like a jolt of wakefulness. He said to reflect like this: what is subject to old age will grow old, and I am not exempt. What is subject to illness will become ill, and I am not exempt. What is subject to death will die, and I am not exempt.

Even though it's so obvious, what I found in myself is so humbling to realize—that in some deep part of myself, I think I am exempt. I can be going along and all of a sudden there's a certain pain in my back or my knee or wherever, and I think, "Oh, why did that happen?" Well, you were born. You have a body. This is what's going to happen. But no, I should be exempt. We really need to take in that this is the nature of this whole mind-body process. It's the dharma, it's the law.

If we can reflect in this way—and often in my practice, when I'm on retreat and these things happen, I will just use this little tagline, "I am not exempt"—it's a very good reminder. It changes my relationship to the experience. Instead of fighting it or resisting it or thinking it shouldn't be happening, I recognize that this is just the nature of things.

Sometimes people may think that all these reflections on change and death and dying and illness are morbid, something we should avoid. Why would anybody want to be thinking about this stuff? But really they are reflections on what is true. We're not imagining this. The Buddha was pointing out that this is the dharma, this is the truth of our lives. If we want to be free, we need to be in alignment with what is true. This is what our practice is all about.

I asked in the beginning of the talk: why be mindful? What is it that we learn from being mindful? It's not enough simply to be mindful—it's necessary, that's the tool, that's the view—but what are we learning from being mindful? We're learning, in this one essential aspect, that whatever has the nature to arise is going to pass. We need to imbibe that very, very deeply. We really need to see that all of our experience is part of an endlessly passing show. It's like the water in a river flowing, or water over a waterfall. It's just phenomena of the mind, of the body, internally, externally—just this endless flow.

Munindraji, my first teacher, used a phrase which resonated for many years in my practice. He would say often, "Empty phenomena rolling on." It's just empty, empty of self. Empty phenomena rolling on. That's what this mind-body is. That's what this world is.

Seeing this clearly—seeing this impermanence, this flow of momentary change, change on every level—seeing it clearly and repeatedly reorients our mind toward care and compassion rather than clinging and attachment. It reorients our mind toward letting go rather than holding on, because we're seeing that there's nothing to hold on to. Deepening our insight, our direct insight, the direct seeing—deepening this reorients our minds toward freedom rather than bondage, rather than being caught.

I'd like to close with one teaching from a Tibetan Rinpoche named Dzigar Kongtrul. I think he really expresses the essence of what we're doing here. He said: "The potential for realization, for awakening, is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself." The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path of liberation.

Now liberation depends on you. This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you.

So that's both our challenge and our inspiration. We can do this. We're on the path. And we can take inspiration from that opening sentence of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: this is the direct path to realization.

CHAPTER 28

# Morning Reflection

Joseph Goldstein · 14 min

> *In this morning reflection, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of the Buddha's most practical observations: that the mind can be either our best friend or our worst enemy, depending largely on our relationship to thoughts. Drawing from the teachings of the Tibetan master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, he illuminates how thoughts, like rainbows, appear through the conjunction of conditions yet have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence.*
>
> *Goldstein outlines three aspects of working with thoughts: recognizing when thinking is present, discerning whether the content is wholesome or unwholesome (rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion or in generosity, love, and wisdom), and investigating the very nature of thought itself. He particularly emphasizes the value of setting an intention to watch for the arising of thoughts, especially during walking meditation and daily activities, rather than only becoming aware after we've been lost in thinking.*
>
> *The practical guidance offered here is both accessible and profound. By maintaining a relaxed awareness that keeps watch for quickly passing thoughts, we begin to see how frequently we unconsciously recreate a sense of self through momentary mind-stories. When we look directly at what a thought actually is—not its content but its essential nature—we discover something remarkably ephemeral and insubstantial. This direct seeing undermines the tremendous power that unnoticed thoughts have to generate suffering in our lives.*

One comment that the Buddha made, which we can see very clearly in our own experience, is that the mind can be our best friend or our worst enemy. I think we've all had experiences of both those situations.

One of the things that most determines whether our minds become our best friends or worst enemies has to do with our understanding of and relationship to the thoughts in our minds. We have so many different kinds of thoughts arising and passing—thousands and thousands of times a day for most people.

I want to read something from one of the great Tibetan masters about this. This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

"When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors. Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all. There is therefore no logical

reason why thoughts should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us. But as long as we take our deluded thoughts as real, they will continue to torment us mercilessly as they have been doing through countless past lives."

That's a very clear statement about how unnoticed thoughts can have such a powerful influence on our experience. And yet when we see into their true nature, we see that they really are empty—empty of substance. There's nothing much there.

So how do we practice developing this understanding and this relationship to thoughts? This becomes a very interesting, liberating, and energizing part of our practice. Because mostly we pay attention to thoughts after the fact. We realize that we've been lost, then we have some kind of reaction to having been lost, and maybe we bring the mind back to the present, to the breath or to a step. But there's a much more active way of engaging with thought as an object that is very illuminating, very freeing.

There are really three steps in working with thoughts, but this morning I just want to emphasize two of them. The three steps are: being aware that the thought is there, so we're mindful of our thinking rather than lost in it; recognizing the content of the thought; and looking at the nature of thought itself.

The second step, which I won't talk about much this morning, is recognizing the content of the thought. Is it wholesome or is it unwholesome? Does the thought contain or is it sourced by greed or hatred or delusion? Or is the content of the thought based in non-greed, generosity, love, or wisdom? That's part of what we can do in being with thought.

The third aspect is really looking at the nature of thought itself—investigating the mind, bringing the wisdom mind to see directly what a thought is. Not the content, but the very nature of a thought. What is a thought?

I want to talk a little bit about the first and third of these.

First, we have to recognize that a thought is present, that the mind is actually thinking. If we're not aware of it, then we're simply carried along on the train of association. At some point we hop off the train and don't quite know where we've been.

It takes a certain intentionality. Perhaps at the beginning of a sitting or a walking or moving about, you might set the intention in the mind: let me keep an eye out for the arising of thought. Instead of it being something that you try to catch up with after it's already happened, you're setting the intention to have the mind keeping an eye out for

the arising of thought. You're with the body or the breath or movement or sounds, whatever. But somewhere in the mind is that intentionality—the intention to be aware as thoughts arise in the mind.

I find this particularly helpful and interesting in the walking. Not only formal walking meditation, but just in walking about. It's so easy to get caught up in the activity of what one is doing. You're going maybe for your yogi job, or you're going to your room to do something, or having a cup of tea, or even walking to the dining room—and your idea is to get to the dining room. Very often we're caught up more in the activity of what we're doing and we've lost that settled-back ability to just be watching for the quickly passing thoughts that may arise. They may not be big ones; they may be really quick.

This is very helpful. In a way, it's like keeping an eye out for Mara. Mara is going to come in the form of a seductive thought: "Let's see if I can catch this yogi."

But if you're just doing whatever you're doing—as I say in the walking, I've really found it very helpful because it's not a big strain when you're walking or moving about. You don't have to work very hard to be aware of the predominant experience. You're just taking a step and it's very obvious and it doesn't take a lot of effort. We want to be attentive to it, but it doesn't take much energy to actually feel a step or a movement, so we can give a little more attention to that awareness which is keeping an eye out for the thoughts that are arising.

It's clear. You're just moving about, you're walking around, but there's some place in the mind that's just watching those quickly passing thoughts. And it's not necessarily big ones or dramatic ones. They can be very slight, light, quick. With practice, you can get quite skilled in becoming increasingly aware of these passing thoughts.

This has a tremendous benefit. First, it shows how often we've been lost in thought, unbeknownst to us—where we get carried away and we don't even know it. It begins to show how each of these little thoughts are also reconditioning the mind, because a lot of them have to do with "I" and "me" and "mine" and past and future. We create a whole sense of self even for a couple of moments. It may not be a big drama, just these momentary mind stories of self, but they happen so frequently that we are often recreating and reconditioning this strong sense of self throughout the day—and we don't even know it.

Even when I'm going for a walk, in addition to all the kinds of walking you're doing right within the Forest Refuge—walking meditation or doing some task—even if you're choosing to go for a walk, which should be meditative as well, it's very interesting.

You're walking, enjoying the openness, the spaciousness—just watch. It will give you a new appreciation of what the mind does and what the mind is doing throughout the day in a very ordinary way. It's very illuminating.

So this is the first thing: to really give attention to watching out for the arising, the appearing, the appearance—just those quick thoughts that go through the mind. Once you get a little bit relaxed in your awareness of this, so it's not a question of getting tight or tense, it's not like a cat at a mouse hole—it's very relaxed. You're moving about, but you're just, as I say, keeping an eye out for the thoughts. The more relaxed you are, the easier it will be to see them. The relaxation is an important point.

When you feel like you've gained a little bit of experience, or understand this, or have practiced with it, at times then, as these thoughts come, you can ask yourself the question: What is a thought? Not what is it saying, but just as a sound appears and disappears and we have a sense of what a sound is—what is a thought? What is the phenomenon?

Very interesting, because it's so ephemeral, so insubstantial, so empty, like Dilgo Khyentse said. When we really look directly at the nature of thought, we see that it's almost nothing. It's little more than nothing.

And yet, when we're not aware of them, they have tremendous power to cause suffering in our lives. How much suffering do we go through because we get lost in and carried away in the thought processes? They create whole stories, whole dramas with all the attendant emotions. We can get totally caught up in a whole mind-created world, forgetting or not seeing in those moments that this is just a thought in the moment.

It would be really helpful for you to practice with this during this time. I'm going to talk a little bit about this tonight, but even more next Monday, because I really want to give emphasis to this. But I thought it would be good to have a chance to actually practice with it, give attention to it, so that in talking about it then you'll actually be able to perhaps understand it on a deeper level from your own experience, not just theoretically.

Good luck.

CHAPTER 29

# No Foothold

Joseph Goldstein · 57 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from his personal retreat reflections, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of the central challenges of Buddhist practice: integrating relative and ultimate levels of truth. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching in the Sabba Sutta (SN 35.23), he explains how all experience can be understood through the six sense spheres, revealing the dreamlike nature of conventional reality.*
>
> *Goldstein examines our deeply conditioned misperception that pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad, citing the Buddha's stark teaching that liberation is impossible while attachment to pleasant and aversion to unpleasant remain. He offers practical approaches for working with this, including the reflection "though your body is afflicted, may your mind be unafflicted," and the practice of noticing how the knowing mind itself remains unchanged whether experiencing pleasure or pain.*
>
> *The talk goes deeper into the subtle ways we create and reinforce the sense of self through unnoticed thoughts and, most fundamentally, through identification with consciousness itself—the sense of "I am" as the knower. Goldstein shares a transformative practice from his retreat: using the phrase "whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away" not merely as a statement about impermanence, but as a moment-to-moment instruction that cuts through craving for becoming. He concludes with the Buddha's teaching that "nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine," pointing to the freedom available in any moment through letting go rather than getting.*

Tonight I'd like to speak about some of the things that were of interest to me on my own recent retreat, and maybe they'll be of interest to you. We'll see. I just always find, after all these years of doing retreats, it's such an endlessly interesting journey when we take the time to look into our own minds and bodies and see what's going on. Very often when I come out of retreat, people will ask me, "Well, how was it?" And every year it's the same: it's everything. We see it all.

One of the biggest challenges for Dharma practitioners is the integration in our lives of the levels of relative and more ultimate truth. A lot of the teachings are expressed in very conventional language, and we live our lives very much on the level of relative conventional reality. Yet in our Dharma practice, we're also exploring what could be called the more ultimate level of truth or reality.

The Buddha described this more ultimate level in several different ways, which you're very familiar with. He talked about understanding reality in terms of the five aggregates: body, form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness. That's one template for understanding the more ultimate level. Another template is the six sense spheres: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and their respective sense objects.

The Buddha described, in one very succinct sutta which is really quite remarkable, all of our experience. He called this sutta "The All." It's quite remarkable that he described every aspect of our experience in six phrases. He said: the eye and visible objects, the ear and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. And he challenged anybody to say, is there anything other than that in our experience? It's quite remarkable—we live in these very complicated stories of ourselves and of the world, and yet it's always only these six things that are ever happening.

Being here on retreat, in this very protected and peaceful environment, is really a chance to explore this more ultimate level of reality, to drop out of the more usual relative or conventional level. Even though, as we live in the world, we do need to engage in a very conventional way. We need to relate to people as people, not as a conglomeration of aggregates or sense spheres. That would be rather odd.

So our challenge is to integrate the two levels so that even when we're involved in the world, as we all are in one way or another, we don't lose sight completely of the underlying, empty, insubstantial, selfless nature of it all. It might be something like a lucid dream. In lucid dreaming, which some people experience, there's dreaming, but we know that we're dreaming. Even in the midst of the dream, we know that it's a dream. So can we live our lives like that? To know that on one level it's a dream, and yet at the same time we're in it and we're acting and we're relating.

This gives us a chance to experience life in a much freer way. The more we understand these two levels—relative and ultimate or more ultimate—and how they work together, the more we begin to experience compassion in two different ways. The compassion starts to come not particularly as a practice or as a stance, but really as the natural response to suffering.

We can experience compassion for the suffering, both mental and physical, that we and everyone else goes through in this dreamlike existence. There is a lot of suffering in the world and there's a lot of suffering in our own lives. As we are more open and less self-centered, this response of compassion comes more and more effortlessly.

And then when we awaken even a little bit to the fact that it really is all a dream, it's all empty and insubstantial, we can have compassion for ourselves and others who are still lost in the dream. We begin to see that the real freedom is not in changing the dream, but in waking up. That's really what our practice here is about.

One of the great misconceptions that we have throughout our lives, as we're in the dream, is that the ordinary perception we have of ourselves and others is somehow accurate and true—that our perceptions reflect some true, stable, ultimate reality, as if the world is solid and fixed and we know what's what. This misconception that the world is as we perceive it leads to tremendous suffering, both globally and individually.

There's a Buddhist scholar named Rune Johansson, and he expressed this very clearly. He said, "Things are seen through the lenses of our desires, prejudices, and resentments, and are transformed accordingly." We're seeing the world, we're perceiving the world through the lenses of our desires and our resentments, and then we're taking that to be the reality.

Just one somewhat humorous example: years ago I was on a retreat in Australia, practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita, and I was doing walking meditation in the parking lot where all the cars were parked.

I was doing walking meditation and then I saw this bird right at the back of a car. It saw its reflection in the chrome bumper, and every time it saw its reflection, it flew into it and hit the bumper, then fell back. And then it saw its reflection again in the bumper, thinking it was another bird, flew into it, attacked it, fell back.

Now I do not want to slight birds, but this particular one had a bird brain because it kept on doing this. I mean, you would think it would learn. But how often are we doing the same thing? We're just flying into the world as we perceive it and getting involved in all kinds of suffering, not seeing that much of what we see is seen through the filter of our wants and likes and dislikes.

Just think about a very common situation: all the assumptions we have about other people. I'm sure each one of you has plenty of ideas about everyone else in this room, and you're not even speaking to them. But all kinds of judgments arise—good or bad, like or dislike. And it's all just assumptions. We're making it up. Here on retreat there's not much interpersonal interaction, but out in the world, we're often relating to people based on these assumptions. And my experience is that they're very often inaccurate. When we get to know somebody, we begin to understand them in a completely different way.

So we can also understand how one very common perception—or misperception—informs and influences both our meditation practice and our lives. This one is so deeply rooted. I think probably everyone here shares in this misperception. And that is the deeply conditioned view that pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad.

Almost all of us, probably all of us, have this preference for what is pleasant and avoidance of what is unpleasant. Yet, as the Buddha said very directly in the teachings—and this particular statement always kind of makes me sit up straight—he said, "As long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible."

That's a very strong statement that runs counter to this deeply held perception that we have. It's so counter to our experience. So then how to work with this? Because the Buddha was so clear in what he's saying.

For myself, I found that rather than simply holding this as some far-off goal—well, maybe someday, in five hundred lifetimes, I'll be in the place where there's no preference, where pleasant and unpleasant are fine—instead of thinking of it as some ultimate goal, I began to see that we can actually practice that for short moments. We can all taste the truth of that and the peace of that, even if it's for short moments at a time. And as we do that, we become a little more familiar with the possibility of it. Oh, this is the mind that is non-reactive to pleasant or unpleasant.

So a few reflections that over the years have helped me explore this possibility. Because if we are really interested in liberation—not simply in making the dream better, but if we're really interested in freeing the mind—this is something we have to address, we have to look at in ourselves. How can we begin just to play, to explore what this possibility is?

There's one teaching in the suttas, a phrase that comes up often when the Buddha is visiting someone who is very sick or dying. The dialogue will often go, "How are you feeling? Are your pains diminishing?" And the person will often say, "No, they're not diminishing, they're getting stronger." Then come these descriptions of how their heads feel like they're going to explode and the pain is getting so intense—very strong descriptions of the body in difficult circumstances, in painful circumstances.

And the Buddha's comment, which is very simple but profound: "Though your body is afflicted, may your mind be unafflicted."

Even to think of that as a possibility. We think that for us to be at peace, somehow the body has to be unafflicted. But it's not like that, because that's not the nature of the body. It will be afflicted at different times—as we grow older, or ill, or dying. So can the

mind remain unafflicted even as the body is afflicted? We can take this as a point of investigation. What would this mean? Can we look inside at the nature of the mind that might remain unafflicted?

I had quite an interesting experience of this some years ago. It was January, and I had gone with friends for a week's vacation in the Caribbean. Pleasant. Every sense door pleasant. Pleasant sights, pleasant sounds, pleasant everything. It was just pleasant.

Then I came back to Barre in January. That particular January was freezing cold—I mean, it can get really, really cold here. Maybe twenty below zero with a biting icy wind. Exceedingly unpleasant.

As I was walking in this really unpleasant weather, I began to contrast the two experiences. What I saw was really interesting: the nature of the knowing mind was the same. The nature of the mind to know, simply to know what's happening—it was knowing pleasant, it was knowing unpleasant, but the quality of the knowing itself was the same. The quality of knowing was not affected or afflicted. It simply knew.

So it's turning the attention to the very nature of knowing, the very nature of awareness. Even as unpleasant things are arising, if we abide in or understand the mind that knows what's happening, it gives us a taste, a glimpse of a possibility: this is how my mind can be unafflicted even as the body is afflicted.

Another way of turning the mind to this possibility—and I've found this practice very helpful over the years—is when the body is suffering in some way, when there's pain or distress, and I can see the mind tightening or contracting or having aversion to that experience, which is a common response, I start reflecting: can I be with this experience of pain or discomfort as if these are my dying moments? It's like practice for dying. It's very likely, or at least not unlikely, that when we are dying it may not be comfortable—most likely it won't be. So can we practice for that?

What's so interesting is that as soon as I reframed it from the more conventional perception—"my body's killing me, I don't like this, my back hurts, my knees hurt"—to "these are the dying moments, how do I want to be with this?"—just that reframe settled the awareness, settled the mind back. I can be with this in a more equanimous way.

This is a very good practice, and the Buddha talked about this reflection on dying. Not an intellectual reflection, but actually relating to experience in the moment as if this is our dying moment. How do we want to be with it? And I think you may be surprised at how much clarity, how much stability comes from that reframing.

We carry this same preference for pleasant and avoidance of unpleasant into our meditation practice too. It's not just in our life experiences. There's a commonly held view, and I'm sure at times all of you have had this perception, that a pleasant sitting is good and a painful sitting is bad. Maybe not during retreat, but perhaps at home when you're practicing. You get up from a sitting and somebody asks, "How was your sitting?" If it was pleasant, you probably say, "Yeah, it was a good sitting." And if there was a lot of difficulty, "It was really a bad sitting." Because we're laying this misperception—that pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad—right onto our meditation.

Even though we know intellectually that this is not so, and we've all heard it so many times, the quality of the sitting has to do with how mindful we are, not how pleasant or unpleasant it is. But still this misperception keeps arising because it's rooted in the latent tendencies of desire and aversion. We want what's pleasant and we don't want what's unpleasant. So we interpret it as good and bad.

Of course, a very obvious question arises: why not crave what is pleasant? Doesn't that seem like a normal and natural thing to do—wanting what's pleasant and not wanting what's unpleasant? It seems so obvious that this is a reasonable way to live.

But what the Buddha pointed out over and over again is that even pleasant experiences are not ultimately satisfying precisely because they change, they're impermanent, they're not lasting. We're left craving another pleasant experience, which doesn't last. We crave another one and another one. This is the endless cycle of saṃsāra. This is what keeps us on the wheel—thinking the goal is to have as many pleasant experiences as possible. And they don't last. So we want another, and it doesn't last.

It's like being one of those animals on a revolving wheel. And we miss the opportunity to experience the peace and the freedom of not wanting.

As long as we're living with the misconception that pleasant is good, that I should have as much pleasant experience as possible, we keep wanting it, it keeps disappearing, and we want more. As long as we're caught in that cycle, that way of understanding things, we're missing the chance to experience the peace of not wanting.

So here's a very interesting experiment for you to try. The next time a desire should happen to arise in your mind—you know, maybe it will be in a few days or so—whenever the next desire arises, if you can be mindful, even if it's not right at the beginning, even if somewhere in the middle you become aware, pay particular attention to how that wanting mind feels, how the desiring mind feels, without any preconception. Just explore it for yourself. Don't believe anything. Really see: how does this feel, to be wanting, to be desiring?

And then, at a certain point, that desire is going to go away. It's going to change. In that moment of it changing, the moment of it disappearing, notice how it feels when the mind doesn't want. And just compare the two. Very interesting.

We're living in the illusion that the desire or the wanting itself is pleasant. Our whole society is basically oriented toward feeding your desires, as if desire itself is a good thing to have. Because we're not paying attention to how it actually feels—especially in contrast to how it feels when it's not there.

I've found it very remarkable: when I can remember to do this, it always feels like being let out of the grip of something. The desire is gripping us. So we begin to see and feel for ourselves, not as an intellectual concept, but actually experiencing the peace that the Buddha is talking about.

And again, short moments many times. We don't have to frame it in terms of, "Oh, I have to be free of all desire for all time." I hope it happens soon, but most likely it won't. But we can experience, each one of us for ourselves, in these short moments, and that reinforces the understanding.

What makes the Buddha's teaching so powerful is his recognition and pointing out that because our perceptions are conditioned by our mental habits, we can also train our habits and train our perceptions in a way that leads to greater freedom, that leads to greater peace. We can actually train our minds.

Very few people in the world know this, even though hopefully it's obvious to all of you. Most people are living their lives as if, well, this is just how my mind is—probably some mixture of skillful and unskillful. It's only when we really start paying attention inwardly, as you are all doing, that we discover: yes, the mind can be trained. We can let go of those patterns, those ways of perceiving—like "pleasant is good" and "unpleasant is bad"—let go of those ways of perceiving that simply cause suffering to ourselves and others. This itself is a great insight, and it really fuels all of our practice.

So that's one way we can taste the peace of not wanting, of non-reactivity—freeing ourselves from going after the pleasant and pushing away the unpleasant.

Also, in our meditation practice, as it develops in a classical way, there is a stage of practice, a stage of insight, which is called equanimity about formations. This is when the mindfulness and concentration and the other factors of enlightenment are all quite well developed, and the mind can abide in a flow of equanimity for long periods of time. People can spend hours in this place where there is simply no reactivity in the mind.

Ajahn Jumnian, the Thai meditation master, described this state. He said, "At some point the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched, with no interference." That's just a great little reminder. Can we just let everything arise and be there without interfering, without trying to do anything about it? Seen and left untouched, with no interference. "One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is seen as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own, a perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing."

So this is possible. This is not some super-attainment of awakening or Buddhahood. This is just the natural development of our meditation practice. We can develop the mind to this extent.

But there's another way to really experience non-reactivity, even before the development of this stage of insight.

And this particular way I've mentioned earlier, last week sometime, is very powerful because this particular way of paying attention really undercuts, in quite a profound way, the very creation of the notion of self.

If you remember, I think I spoke briefly about having the intention in the sitting, but even more so perhaps in walking or as you're moving about, to really pay attention to the quickly passing thoughts. These thoughts—so many thoughts are arising. Many of them are very light. They're not heavy thoughts. They're not particularly disturbing. They come and they go and they pass through. And because they're so light and no big drama, mostly we're not paying attention to them. We hardly even know they're there.

But each of these thoughts, even though it's just maybe for a few seconds at a time, each one of them, when they're unnoticed, is reconditioning our minds in a particular way. It's the creation of the ongoing inner environment in which we live. By themselves, the thoughts are little more than nothing. They're just little passing blips of energy. And that's why it's hard to notice them. We have to have a very specific intention: let me keep an eye out for these. Otherwise they will pass unnoticed.

As I was paying attention in this way to these just lightly passing thoughts, I noticed that light as they were and not that disturbing, the content of most of them was self-referential in one way or another. And so because—or when—we're not noticing them, we are continually through the day reinforcing or recreating this sense of self.

You can see it particularly: this just ongoing, incessant flow of mind worlds is very much fueled by the concepts, the deeply held concepts we have of past and future. If you kept track of the content of your thoughts, my guess is—and I know this from watching my thoughts—maybe ninety percent are either thoughts of the past or thoughts of the future. And who's the star of this past and this future? Moi.

But it's so interesting, and it can be tremendously liberating, if we really look and investigate: what is it that we call past? We think the past has this big reality, but what is it? We have certain thoughts in the moment—memories, remembrances—we put a concept "past," we call that past, and then, with some mental gymnastics, toss the concept back behind us as if the past is a reality back there someplace. But really, all that's happening is that it's a thought in the moment.

And we do the same thing with the future. Planning, imagining, fantasizing—we label all of these kinds of thoughts "future." And then we believe the concept. We give a reality to the concept. We toss it out ahead of ourselves as if there's a future, whereas our only experience of past and future is as a thought in the moment.

This is tremendously liberating to see, because most of us carry the concepts of past and future as a huge burden in our lives. It's like we're carrying mountains on our shoulders—past and future and all the worries and anxieties or hopes or fears or whatever. And all of those are arising because we're not seeing that they're just concepts. They're just a thought in the moment. A thought is very light. It's gone. Past and future.

We can see this. We don't have to be super yogis to see this. We just have to look at the nature of our thoughts, of these particular thoughts.

We can also see our attachment to time with regard to the present. It's not only past and future, so this gets a little more interesting—just because so much of spiritual practice and spiritual language will be: in the present, stay in the present. But even the concept of present can be the cause of a lot of selfing.

We see it particularly, not in thoughts of past and future, but in terms of the comparing mind. Even here, you're on retreat, but obviously you're seeing all these other people here. How often, when we see somebody else here or outside in our lives, does the mind immediately go to a comparison? I'm better than, I'm worse than, I'm the same as.

It can be with reference to physical appearance. It could be with reference to personality. Here on retreat, it could be in reference to the meditation practice itself. Maybe you see somebody who's being exquisitely mindful. "Oh, they're such good yogis. I'm

such a bad yogi." And then you see somebody who's walking around in a somewhat casual way. "Oh, I'm such a good yogi. They're such a bad yogi." We're just creating self in that comparison, right here in the present.

The Buddha talks about time in these two ways I mentioned. First he reminds us: past has already gone, future not yet come, abide in the present, not clinging to anything. And then he says—this is in the Dhammapada—"Let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present, and cross over to the further shore." I love that. Let go of the present. So what does that mean?

By paying attention to the quickly passing thoughts that are arising in the mind—whether sitting or walking or moving around—we slowly begin to weaken their conditioning on the mind. All the past thoughts of self, all the future thoughts of self, "I was," "I will be," present thoughts of self in comparing—when we see those thoughts as being just thoughts, we're weakening their power, weakening this conditioning of self.

Yet as seductive as these thoughts are—and as I said, it takes an intention to really become aware of them; you have to set the intention, perhaps at the beginning of a walking period or a sitting or just as you're moving around, "Okay, I'm going to really keep an eye out for these"—then it becomes possible to do it. But as seductive as these thoughts are, even if it's just for a few moments at a time, there is something that we identify with even more than these thoughts. And that is our identification, our creation of a sense of self, through identifying with consciousness, with awareness.

This is even more subtle than identification with thoughts. We identify with the one who's knowing all of this. Who's knowing the thoughts? Who's knowing the sound? It's very easy to become, "Well, I'm the one knowing it all." We might see the passing nature of all these arising phenomena, but then we settle back, we create a little nest, we create a home of self in awareness. "I'm the one knowing."

This is the most fundamental sense of "I am," even more than being identified with our thoughts, our emotions, or our body. It's identifying with consciousness, with awareness—"This is who I really am. I'm the knower, the observer, the witness."

This is what the Buddha said about understanding this "I am": "By rightly understanding 'I am,' one makes an end of suffering. The eradication of 'I am' is the attainment of Nibbāna here and now." This is the most fundamental belief, this is the core belief of self—"I am," the identification with consciousness, with knowing. The eradication of this sense of "I am" is the attainment of Nibbāna here and now. These words of the Buddha point to the importance of understanding this.

As we're doing our practice, we're building all the tools for investigating this "I am," this I am-ness. So the question is, how can we begin to really explore this for ourselves?

One way is to see how this felt sense of "I am," being the knower, is showing itself, is manifesting right in our meditation practice. We think we're meditating, and yet unknowingly we may be reinforcing the I am-ness. When there's a strong sense of being the knower, the observer of experience, very often that sense of "I am" pulls us into an unskillful, ambitious striving. "I am going to get something. I am going to have this new experience." It's all rooted in the belief that there is an "I am" in the first place. And we forget that freedom—and the practice of freedom, moment to moment—is in letting go. It's not in getting.

Freedom, and it's not something far off. Freedom in the moment, what we can practice moment to moment, is in letting go. It's in this rather than in getting something.

But one of the most interesting things I found in my practice is to see how often, in my meditation, I'm in the moment but leaning into the process. Leaning in. It's like an energetic being with this in order for something else to happen. And it can be with something so simple. We can be feeling the breath, but how are we with it? We're with the breath in order to become more concentrated, or in order to be more calm, or in order to feel the next breath.

The Buddha called this craving for becoming. It's like we're in this moment and on some level—sometimes it's very obvious and sometimes it's really subtle—there's just an energetic craving for becoming something. We're waiting for the next moment to fulfill some expectation of a result.

There's a common expression in the suttas, which I mentioned sometime—I think it was last week or this morning. See, past is dissolved. And the older you get, the more it dissolves. That's kind of one of the good things of aging.

This phrase is found often in the suttas. It's the expression people used to express their awakening, their enlightenment. The phrase is: the understanding that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. I spoke of this with regard to impermanence—everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Well, on this recent retreat, this phrase came to mind and I started using it in a different way. It was perhaps the most interesting part of my retreat. Instead of taking it simply as a statement that everything changes, which we all know, I took it as an instruction. As I was just with my moment-to-moment experience, this phrase would come to mind: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And what it did in the moment was cut through the craving for becoming anything. Because whatever

would arise will also pass away. There's nothing to want, there's nothing to crave, because whatever it is that we're wanting or craving, it's just going to pass away like everything else.

The power of the phrase for me in practice, applying it in the practice, was that there was no exception. There was no back door—"well, everything but this," or "everything changes but this is worth craving." No exception. Whatever has the nature to arise.

By bringing that phrase to life, right in the moment-to-moment experience, it was remarkable. There is nothing to want, nothing to lean into, nothing to crave. And for the moment—it's not that it effected some huge super enlightenment—but for the moment, I could really feel that stepping off the wheel, stepping off the wheel of becoming. Because what keeps us on the wheel is craving.

And so the Four Noble Truths became so vivid. Yes, what keeps the whole thing going on a big level and on a moment-to-moment level is just this craving for becoming. In this moment, wanting something else. And the freedom is available in any moment. It's always available, if we remember: oh, whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Just stepping off that wheel of wanting, dropping back. Everything keeps flowing on, but there's no craving or wanting involved. And so we experience that peace, that freedom, even if it's for short moments.

When the Buddha said, "Let go of the present and cross over to the further shore," he's not suggesting that we go someplace. The further shore is in letting go of the craving. And this points us in the direction—or puts us in the field, in the arena—of what the Buddha was pointing to when he used such terms as the unborn, or the unformed, or non-occurrence. We get a feel for what he meant.

This opens up a whole different understanding of what our practice is about. It's not about getting.

It's about letting go.

So I'll just close with this. This is also the Buddha's words from one sutta. We can practice this very profound instruction that the Buddha gave when he said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine." Not the body, not thoughts, not emotions, not sights, not sounds, not awareness, not consciousness itself. That's the letting go of the "I am." Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine.

The sutta goes on to say: whoever hears this has heard all of the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings.

So again, it goes very deep and profound, but all of us can really explore the experience of this in moments. Maybe just for short moments, but if we keep it in mind, it becomes short moments many times. And it really starts to transform our understanding of ourselves and how we're living in the world.

So let's just sit for a few moments and let everything fade away.

CHAPTER 30

# The Nature of Mind: Intrinsically Empty, Naturally Radiant, Ceaselessly Responsive

Joseph Goldstein · 57 min


*In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein examines the Pāli and Sanskrit term bodhicitta (the heart-mind of awakening) through both its relative and ultimate dimensions. On the relative level, bodhicitta manifests as compassion—the aspiration that our practice benefit all beings, as exemplified by the Dalai Lama and the Buddha's exhortation to his first sixty enlightened disciples to "go forth for the good of the many." On the ultimate level, bodhicitta points to the empty nature of mind itself, where compassion and emptiness are revealed not as polarities but as expressions of each other.*

*Drawing on teachings from the 18th-century Dzogchen master Shabkar, Goldstein unpacks three essential qualities of mind: intrinsically empty (suññatā), naturally radiant (the cognizing capacity of awareness), and ceaselessly responsive (spontaneous compassion). He explores multiple doorways into understanding emptiness—from recognizing flow states where self-reference dissolves, to seeing that phenomena are "ungovernable" (anattā), to directly investigating the space-like nature of awareness itself. The teaching distinguishes between spaciousness as a pleasant state and groundlessness as the true flavor of emptiness.*

*The talk offers practical guidance for practitioners, including the contemplation "already here, already aware" to release striving, and the image of ice and water to illustrate how identification with thoughts creates suffering while recognition melts contraction into free-flowing awareness. Goldstein concludes with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teaching that recognizing the empty, selfless nature of phenomena allows "the energy to bring about the good of others" to dawn uncontrived and effortless—revealing compassion as the natural activity of emptiness.*


There's a word in Pali and Sanskrit that has a lot of meaning for our practice. That word is bodhichitta. Literally, we could translate it as the heart-mind—citta—of awakening—bodhi.

On the relative level, bodhichitta refers to compassion, and particularly to the aspiration that we're not practicing for ourselves alone. We can practice with the aspiration that our own awakening be for the benefit of all beings. By cultivating this aspiration

right from the beginning of our practice, it gives a lot of energy. As you're going through different difficulties, you realize that you're going through these not just for yourself, but that your own growing understanding will also benefit everyone else.

In one way or another, we find this compassionate aspiration expressed in many of the Buddhist traditions. Of course, it's central to the Dalai Lama's way of understanding his life and his practice. He wrote something about himself which I find particularly endearing. He said, "Speaking of my own experience, I sometimes wonder why a lot of people like me. When I think about it, I cannot find in myself any specially good quality, except for one small thing. That is the kind heart, which I tried to explain to others and which I do my best to develop myself. Of course, there are moments when I do get angry, but in the depth of my heart I do not hold a grudge against anyone. I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhichitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me I realize how valuable and beneficial it is."

It is endearing. The Dalai Lama, who manifests so much compassion, wonders why a lot of people like him. Well, it's that kind heart—living with that aspiration to benefit all.

The same understanding is found in the Pali Canon. After the Buddha began teaching and when the first sixty disciples had become arahants, he sent them forth with this exhortation. He said, "Go forth, O bhikkhus"—these are monks who had become fully enlightened—"Go forth for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of people and devas. Let not two go by one way. Teach the Dharma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. Proclaim the noble life, altogether perfect and pure. Work for the good of others, you who have done your duty."

So again, it's in all the traditions—this sense that our practice can be motivated by this aspiration to benefit all others. The relative level of bodhichitta is compassion.

On the more ultimate level, it's said that bodhichitta refers to the empty nature of the mind itself. As one teacher expressed it, when compassion and emptiness are both present, enlightenment is unavoidable. These are the two aspects in our practice that we need to cultivate and realize.

One of the great realizations, one of the transforming realizations for me in my own practice, was at a certain point realizing that compassion and emptiness—or compassion and wisdom—are not polarities, but they are expressions of each other. This is our challenge as people: to see how we can integrate the wisdom of emptiness into compassionate responsiveness.

There's one teaching by the Tibetan master Shabkar, who I think was an eighteenth-century Dzogchen master. Beautiful teachings have been passed down from him. There's one verse which he wrote that expresses the unification of relative and ultimate bodhichitta, of compassion and emptiness. He wrote, "The mind's nature is as vivid as a flawless piece of crystal: intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, and ceaselessly responsive."

He's talking about the nature of mind, the nature of our minds—vivid as a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive. Tonight I'd like to talk about these three aspects and how we can actually experience them for ourselves.

How do we understand the term "intrinsically empty"? In English, the term empty or emptiness is really not that appealing. Sometimes we hear the word empty and we might think of it as a kind of blank nothingness or a gray vacuity. It doesn't necessarily inspire us or invite us. But in Pali, in Sanskrit, the word for emptiness is shunyata. Shunyata has many profound meanings in Buddhism—it's a word with tremendous wealth and depth of meaning.

How can we understand shunyata, or emptiness? There are many ways to approach the experience of it. On the very simplest level, we can understand emptiness to mean lack of self-centeredness.

Now usually when we hear the word "self-centered," we think of it as a personality problem—somebody is self-centered and perhaps should see a therapist about it. But there's a deeper meaning to that term. It's when we create a felt sense of self to be at the very center of our lives. Self-centered. Our whole lives revolve around this center of "I" and "me" and "mine." It becomes the reference point for everything we think, everything we feel, everything we sense. It is the felt sense, the idea, the view that there is someone behind experience to whom all experience is happening. That's the deepest meaning of self-centered.

This is our common experience. We view things as "my body, my thoughts, my feelings." "I'm doing, I'm acting, I'm going"—just our normal way of being in the world all centers around this view of self. In that way, to the extent that we do this, we are all self-centered. We're living in the gravitational field of the self-center.

Think about your normal experiences in life—all the hopes, the fears, the worries, the plans. What are they revolving around? They're revolving around some sense of "I," some sense of "mine." This happens in our meditation practice as well. I spoke about this last week—how often our meditation practice itself is fueled by a desire for becoming something. It's a very strongly rooted habitual conditioning.

It's just so interesting. We revolve around these desires for ever new experiences, even when we know that these experiences are continually changing. It's not a hidden mystery. And it's amazing that we continue to do this throughout our lives, relying on some next experience to finally fulfill us—all the time knowing that it won't and that it can't.

Isn't this strange? It really points to the power, the great power of delusion. Because it's something we know, and yet we keep acting on the belief, on the view, of just the next thing, the next meditation experience, the next whatever.

However, the Buddha offered us some hope out of all this. Through sustained wise attention—which is what you're all cultivating here—through the growing strength and power of mindfulness, of concentration, of wisdom, we begin to pull away from this self-referential orbit. We are gradually drawn into the gravitational field of the Dharma, the zero center of the Dharma, rather than the self-center of "I" and "mine."

This was expressed very succinctly by the Sufi poet Rumi when he wrote, "Live in the nowhere that you come from, even though you have an address here." We're all here, and we have an address—that's the conventional world of self and "I" and "other." We live in that world, and it's not to deny that. But even though we have an address here, can we really live in the nowhere that we come from? Can we live in the realization of emptiness? This is the great challenge: to somehow integrate this conventional level of reality with a more ultimate understanding.

There's a little teaching from a Tibetan teacher which I've read many times, but it gets right to the point. He said, "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. You are real, but you think you're really real. You exaggerate it."

That's it. We are real, we interact, we relate in this ordinary way. But on another level, we're not really real. And that's what our practice can discover and explore.

We can experience this emptiness of self—and we do experience it—in many ways. We can get intimations of it in our ordinary lives. Sometimes people have experiences when they enter into an effortless flow. There's something called a "flow state." It might be in any kind of activity—sports, music, work, nature—where due to some conditions

we forget about ourselves and we're just in the flow of experience. Things seem to be flowing on by themselves, without us, and are really much better for that. The flow goes on a lot more easily.

So it's important to pay attention to this, because even in meditation you might have experiences—perhaps sometimes when you're doing walking meditation—where it just seems to be happening by itself. Or in the sitting, where there's just a flow of effortless mindfulness and no one is doing anything. We begin to get a sense, a feeling of this emptiness of self.

We can become aware of, or be reminded of, emptiness of self sometimes through our teachers, either by their words or even by their presence. I had a very striking example of this, although it has happened with many of my really accomplished teachers and masters. Once when Dipa Ma was visiting—she was this extraordinary woman, this yogi with high levels of realization and concentration. I think I've spoken about her before. She was quite an amazing being, just exuding metta and also emptiness. I remember we were at the retreat center where she was leading a retreat, and I saw her come into the hall and bow before the Buddha. Just watching her do that, it was like wisdom bowing to wisdom, or love bowing to love, or emptiness bowing to emptiness. There was such a sense that there was no one there, no self doing that. Sometimes with people like that we can really get a feeling for, or intuit, this experience of emptiness.

Something I mentioned this morning can also lead us into this experience. I know that during the day you practiced it all with this passive voice construction of just things being known moment after moment. If you do practice that and get easeful with it—at first it may be a little awkward, trying to figure out what he's talking about—but as you practice, it's very simple. It's just experiences being known. You might repeat that to yourself just to get into that groove. Then after a while, it's just happening and there's no one there doing anything. We begin to actualize this experience of emptiness.

We begin to see that there is no thing, no entity that the words "I" or "self" refer to. We use those words conventionally and they're useful—I'm not suggesting that we drop the words. But when we really look to see what it is that they refer to, we see that it's just a convenient designation. It's like using the word "storm." Maybe there's a big summer storm with rain and wind and lightning and thunder. Oh, there's a big storm going on. But is there a storm? Is there something called "storm" apart from the wind and the rain and the thunder and the lightning? No, there's no thing called storm. It's just a convenient designation for this coming together of different conditions.

Look closely at the term "self," which we can use—there's nothing wrong with using the word—but when we look closely, we see it's simply a convenient designation for the changing weather pattern of these mental and physical elements. We could just see all of our experiences as changing weather systems. Sometimes it's a bright, clear, sunny day; sometimes it's a big summer storm; sometimes the black flies are out annoying us. It's just changing weather conditions.

As the practice develops, our refinement of perceiving the changes increases. We begin to see that change is happening incredibly rapidly. We begin to see that nothing lasts long enough to be called self, even within one breath. You might say, "Oh, I'm taking an in-breath." But if we're feeling that in-breath carefully and precisely, the in-breath is not one thing. It is a flow of many, many different sensations. And each one of those microscopic sensations is just arising and passing, arising and passing. Our whole life is like that. It's just that we're not usually seeing it on that level.

The point of practice is not necessarily to always be seeing it on that level. But we want to develop the wisdom, the understanding, that underneath the conventional reality of our lives, something else is going on. Because it's on that level that we free ourselves from attachment to this view of "I," this view of self.

One of the early Western pioneers who went to Asia to practice Vipassana was a woman named Jocelyn King. I was in India in the sixties and seventies; she was probably there in the fifties, very early. She had a great line. She said, "It's better to stand on the firm ground of emptiness than on the quicksand of somethingness."

Mostly we think that somethingness is the firm ground. No—it's better to stand on the firm ground of emptiness, letting go of the notion of self, than on the quicksand of somethingness. But how often do we get lost in the quicksand of our thoughts and emotions and feelings and reactions and judgments? So much of our day, so much of our lives is sinking into that quicksand, forgetting the empty, selfless nature of it all.

This is the beauty of being here, having given yourself this great gift of practice in this fantastic place. Your only job—

Your only job is just to stay aware. And in that, the firm ground of emptiness reveals itself.

Another way of understanding and realizing emptiness—one that becomes very obvious as soon as we start paying attention to it, though we often are not paying attention—is seeing that things, the world, life, is not amenable to our will. This is another meaning of the Pali word *anattā*, usually translated as selflessness. It also means ungovernable.

We cannot, with any hope of success at all, say, "May my body never change. May my body not age. May it never grow ill. May I only have pleasant mind states." It's so obvious that everything is arising due to causes and conditions, not because we want it or don't want it to be a certain way. If things were amenable to our will—"Let me always be healthy. Let me always feel good. Let me always be happy"—but it doesn't work like that. And this is the meaning of *anattā*. This is another meaning of emptiness of self. It's ungovernable. And ungovernable means it's not subject to our will.

It doesn't mean that there are not causes and conditions for things to arise. And so to live in harmony in the world and actually fulfill our aspirations is to understand: well, what are the causes and conditions for the mind to be happy? This is the great gift of the Buddha's teaching. He figured all this out, which is quite astounding. Through his own awareness, it's as if he mapped the mind, he mapped the heart. He said these causes and conditions lead to suffering; these causes and conditions lead to worldly happiness; these causes and conditions lead to awakening, to enlightenment. And he didn't say just believe this. He said try it out, see for yourself.

So this is the great gift of understanding this meaning of emptiness—seeing the importance of understanding the causes and conditions necessary for fulfilling whatever aspirations we have.

Here's an interesting way to test your understanding of this. Somewhat here while you're on retreat, but even more so when you leave here and go about in the world: just pay attention to those situations when things are not going the way you would like them to go. Maybe it's some condition of the body, maybe it's some difficulty in a relationship, maybe it's being at the airport two hours early and then seeing your flight is canceled. In those moments when you're bumping up against the world and the world is not doing what you would like it to do, reflect on that rather than just rebounding into some irritation or aversion or judgment or reaction of some kind. Take those situations to notice that they are happening—whatever the circumstance, whether interpersonally or impersonally—that whatever the situation is, it's arising out of different conditions, not because you want it or don't want it to be a certain way.

Just that understanding brings a sense of ease, a sense of relief. Because the more we understand this particular meaning of emptiness—that things are not amenable to our will but arise out of the appropriate conditions—we let go of the illusion of control. And we can see more clearly what actually are the conditions necessary to accomplish our aims. We see with much greater clarity and take much more effective action.

So we experience emptiness in terms of a flow—we get into a flow state. We experience emptiness sometimes in the presence of a great teacher. We experience the meaning of emptiness when we realize things are not amenable to our will, that they're ungovernable in that sense, that there's no self controlling the world.

There's another meaning of emptiness which is emphasized in certain Buddhist traditions, and that is the empty, space-like nature of the mind. This is from a teaching by Padmasambhava, the great Indian adept who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet. He said: "It is certain that the nature of mind is empty and without any foundation whatsoever. Your own mind is insubstantial like the empty sky. Look at your own mind to see whether this is so or not."

There are many teachings like this, pointing us back to look at the nature of awareness itself. One exercise which I've done and found very revealing is just this: whether in sitting or walking or moving about, in hearing a sound—the sound arises, the sound is being heard—sometimes I'll ask the question in my mind, "Can I find what is knowing the sound?" It's just a way of turning the attention back towards awareness itself.

Can I find what is knowing the sound? And when I look, I see there's nothing to find. As one teacher said, the not finding *is* the finding. That's what's to understand—that the mind in that way cannot be found. And so that's another meaning of emptiness: the empty nature of the mind.

But it's really important here, and we need to take care, not to create some idea of emptiness, not to create some concept about it and then get attached to the concept. Somebody came to one teacher and was describing a very empty, spacious quality of mind. They were having what most people—not you, but what most people—would call a good sitting. Open, empty, spacious. And so she was reporting this to the teacher. He could see that there was some attachment to that state, some reification of it. "Oh, this is emptiness."

And he said—making a very interesting distinction here—that a better description than spaciousness for the experience of emptiness is *groundlessness*. When I heard that, I thought, that really cuts through attachment to any state. Because yes, it's lovely when the mind is spacious. We all may have had that experience. But that's just another state. It's a very pleasant state, but it's a state. It's a conditioned arising. Whereas the term groundlessness, at least for me, just cuts through attachment to anything. It's like the ground falls away. And that gives a better flavor of what the experience of emptiness is.

So in this practice—in the direct looking at the empty nature of the mind—it's not so much deconstructing the sense of self by seeing all the component elements of what we call self, but rather it's looking directly, or seeing directly, the empty nature of the mind.

The mind is vivid like a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty. But it's not just empty. Shabkar went on to say: intrinsically empty, *naturally radiant*. That's another aspect or quality of the mind. And radiant here means this innate capacity of the mind to know, the capacity of awareness. As I mentioned, I think maybe this morning, the cognizing power of emptiness. It's not just empty space; the mind actually has the capacity to be aware.

Buddhadasa, the great Thai master of the last century, said we should really call mind "emptiness" because of its space-like nature, but because of the awareness faculty, we call it mind. So this is important. The mind is not just empty space. It has this knowing-aware quality.

This union of emptiness and awareness is an important understanding. The nature of the mind is this union of emptiness and awareness. It was expressed in the first lines of a book I came across. I was in a bookstore and I came across this title: *The Nothing That Is*. I didn't know what the book was about, but the title was so intriguing—*The Nothing That Is*—that sounds really Buddhist. It turns out that the book, by Robert Kaplan, is a history of the number zero. Robert Kaplan was a mathematician at Harvard, and zero was a late discovery, a very powerful idea and concept.

These are the opening lines of the book, the first two lines: "Look at zero and you see nothing. Look through it and you see the world."

That's our practice. Look at the mind and you see nothing. There's nothing to find. Look through it and you see the world.

That's as far as I got in the book. It soon got very technical.

What's important in this realization is that this nature of mind—this union of emptiness and awareness—is not something we have to get. This *is* the nature of mind. It's something we need to recognize and come back to as we free ourselves from the hindrances, free ourselves from delusion.

We let go of all our various and subtle attachments.

Realizing this really can change the way we practice. Instead of practicing with an ambitious striving to get something, we recognize that the nature of mind is already empty and already aware. But we don't always see that. Why? The Buddha said it very

directly: "Luminous, bhikkhus, is the mind. It is defiled by incoming defilements. Luminous is the mind. It is freed from incoming defilements"—or visiting defilements. The important point here is that the defilements which obscure the mind are not intrinsic to it. They're visitors; they come when the conditions are there.

If we learn how to recognize the nature of awareness, the empty nature of awareness, it's already here. In my own practice, especially when I would find myself caught up in striving—sometimes very obvious, sometimes really subtle, sometimes just a kind of leaning into the next moment—I would use the mantra "already here" or "already aware." Just those couple of words would remind me to settle back. It's already here. I simply need to be aware of what's arising, not to get something. And the whole system relaxes.

One image that describes this movement from delusion to awareness is the image of ice and water. Ice is hard, frozen, solid. Ice is the mind when we're caught up or identified with a thought, a feeling, an emotion, our story. You can feel that sense of contraction when we are lost, when we are identified with the movies of our minds. Water is free-flowing. Water is the mind when it's not identified, not attached, not caught—just in the flow of phenomena arising and passing away. Empty phenomena rolling on.

Now the big secret—ready? This is the big secret: water is nothing other than melted ice. The free flow of water, the free flow of experience, is not some far-off attainment. "One day I'll be water and just be freely flowing"—no. Water is nothing other than melted ice. Even with all these thoughts and emotions and stories, as soon as we see them for what they are, the ice melts and we're back in the free flow of experience.

You've all had this experience many times. Pay attention the next time you're caught up in some story—probably it will happen sometime before you leave. The next time the mind is caught up, notice that moment when you come out from being lost, when you remember: "Oh, all of that, that whole big drama I was caught up in, that I had such strong feelings and emotions about—it was nothing more than just some thoughts and feelings in the mind." It had been ice, and it melted, and you're right back in the flow.

It's just so amazing, the power of unnoticed thoughts. When we're not aware that they are just thoughts, we are lost in the movies of our minds, living in this mind-created world. And then we wake up from it. It's like coming out of a movie theater. We may have been totally involved in the story of the film, then we step out of the theater and there's that sense of the mind enlarging. "Oh, there's a bigger reality." We realize that nothing in the movie theater was really happening.

I find this whole thing amazing. I really do. It's very good to have a sense of humor about all this, because as I said earlier, in Tsoknyi Rinpoche's phrase, so much of our suffering is real but not true. It's not that the suffering isn't there—when we are caught in the story, we are suffering.

But the potential for freedom is always there. And it's not twenty years down the road—it's right in this moment of simply seeing what's happening. It's like being in a prison cell where the door is always unlocked. At any moment, we can step out. There's nothing keeping us there except our not seeing.

So that's why what you're doing here is so powerful, just spending all day practicing seeing—getting lost and waking up, getting lost and waking up, over and over again, and observing that very process. It's tremendously liberating.

**Ceaselessly Responsive**

Intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive—this is the nature of mind. So what does "ceaselessly responsive" mean?

In the open, empty awareness, there is a natural and spontaneous compassionate response to the world and to the people around us. It's like water flowing down a mountainside. The water will find the most direct way—which doesn't always mean straight down—but according to the contours of the land, the water will find the shortest way down the mountain.

As we move out of the orbit of self-centeredness into the gravitational field of the empty center, the gravitational field of the Dharma, of emptiness, we find that there is a spontaneous responsiveness to situations. We begin to have a very active engagement in the world, responding to the suffering that's there—our own and others'—in a much more open and compassionate way. We begin to respond in whatever way seems appropriate, in whatever way is possible.

This can show itself, and does show itself, in many ways in our lives. It's a beautiful part of our unfolding practice to see in ourselves and in others a growing compassionate response to different situations.

There's a story of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese leader, when she was under house arrest—which lasted something like seventeen years. She was having an interview with an Australian newspaper, and the journalist asked, "Don't you want to bring the generals down?" She replied, "No, I want to bring them up." Here were people doing terrible

things in the country, and yet her compassionate response to that situation was: "No, I don't want to bring them down. I want to bring them up. I want to elevate their understanding."

Sometimes the responsiveness can manifest in very small ways. The emptier we are of self, of self-reference, it may be small gestures of friendliness or kindness or generosity. We shouldn't overlook these very small moments in our lives. The Dalai Lama said, "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend. This gives me a genuine feeling of happiness. It is the practice of compassion." Such a simple statement: I try to treat everyone I meet as an old friend.

Then we think of our own responses to everyone we meet. Probably, at least at times—maybe not often, but at least at times—how many judgments come in, how many projections, likes and dislikes, even before we actually say anything to them. This is the habit of mind. Can we create a new habit?

Compassion can also manifest as times of great courage or determination. Think of truly exceptional beings like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela, in situations of immense suffering. I used to watch films of Dr. King leading marches, both in the North and the South, often surrounded by people filled with hatred. And he was holding the space of love. It was amazing to see that potential, that possibility.

And the story of Mandela—when he came out of prison and became the first president post-apartheid, it is astounding. I had taught in South Africa. It is amazing that country did not erupt in violent civil war, given the oppression and cruelty that had happened there. But he held the space of reconciliation. This is the potential of compassionate response—requiring great courage and determination—in the midst of tremendous difficulty.

There's a teacher in California named Lou Richmond. Some years ago, he contracted a terrible disease: viral encephalitis, a brain virus. It was terrible. He was really on the verge of death, in a coma for two weeks.

He suffered brain damage and other disabilities. He said it took him three to four years to recover from this illness, and many people don't.

He had been a Zen teacher and still is, and this is what he wrote after his illness: "Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddha's teaching, I say this: everything is connected, nothing lasts, you are not alone."

This is really just a restatement of the three marks of existence—impermanence, not-self, and suffering. But it's very interesting how he described the truth of dukkha: you are not alone. He said, "I don't think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as 'you are not alone' before my illness. But now I find that talking about it that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer in one way or another and at different times means we are all in the same boat. And that's what allows us to feel compassion."

It's the universality of this truth, the universality of the truth of dukkha, of suffering, expressed as "you are not alone." When we remind ourselves of that, it really opens the heart to compassion for ourselves and for others.

In understanding compassion and how it's the natural responsiveness of the heart, of the mind, it's important not to create a hierarchy of compassionate action—thinking this action is really compassionate and this is just moderately compassionate. The field of compassionate responsiveness is limitless. It's the field of suffering beings, and we each find our own way in it. We each find our own way in expressing this compassion. Sometimes it might be active engagement with the world. Sometimes it might mean sitting in a cave for twenty years, practicing to awaken with the aspiration for the benefit of all. And if you don't want to sit in the cave for twenty years, you could sit here for twenty years. That could be as compassionate an action as being on the front lines of social action. There's no hierarchy.

Think of the bodhisattva. How many lifetimes did he spend as a solitary renunciate? You can just imagine his parents, relatives, people saying, "What is that guy doing? He's just selfish, sitting in a cave by himself for all these years." And yet, after all those lifetimes of practice flowering in the awakening of Buddhahood, we're here today because of the flowering of that compassion. So we must be careful not to judge or discriminate. It all has to do with the motivation and the aspiration in the heart.

The mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal—intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, and in its aware quality, ceaselessly responsive. The more we recognize the innate empty wakefulness of mind, the more the compassionate responsiveness comes forth. And the more we practice compassion free of self-reference, the more we recognize its empty nature.

I'll close with this wonderful teaching from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the truly great Tibetan masters of the last century. He said, "When you recognize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena"—which is what we're all doing here—"the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

This is the union of relative and ultimate bodhichitta. Compassion is the activity of emptiness. And this is really the great work that we're all doing here.

CHAPTER 31

# Compassion and Equanimity in Difficult Times

Joseph Goldstein · 1h53

> *In this talk at True North Insight, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of the most pressing questions of our time: how can we remain open to the immense suffering in the world without becoming overwhelmed or withdrawing into indifference? He presents equanimity and compassion as complementary qualities essential for navigating challenging times—equanimity providing the spacious, balanced awareness needed for clear discernment, and compassion arising naturally when we're willing to come close to suffering.*
>
> *Goldstein distinguishes equanimity from its "near enemy" of indifference, emphasizing that true equanimity is alive, bright, and discerning rather than withdrawn or foggy. Similarly, he explores how compassion can slip into sorrow or overwhelm when mixed with aversion to suffering. The phrase "How can I help?" emerges as a compassionate koan that keeps us engaged without being consumed by anger or despair. Drawing on his own decades of practice with fear, Goldstein shares the transformative power of acceptance—how the simple recognition "it's okay" can unlock states that resistance only strengthens.*
>
> *The talk includes rich discussion on working with anger in social activism, extending mettā to those who cause harm, distinguishing love from attachment, and practicing with grief. Goldstein reminds us that while the conditioning we face is deep—both personal and cultural—the path of transformation is simple though not easy, available in each moment we choose awareness over reactivity.*

Good evening.

My name is Daryl Lynn Ross, and I'm one of the founders, a guiding teacher, and a member of the board of True North Insight.

I want to warmly welcome each one of you, and of course, a warm and grateful welcome to Joseph. Thank you so much for coming.

You know, when you welcome a guest into your home, you welcome them by their name, which is personal and particular. I can't do that here, but I do want to express True North Insight's warm welcome to each one of you. Whatever your reason for coming, your personal history, religious or ethnic background, the color of your skin, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, education, physical ability, and any other characteristics with which you might identify, please know you are warmly welcomed here.

We of True North Insight are so delighted to have Joseph Goldstein with us tonight and tomorrow. Joseph is one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, which recently celebrated its fortieth year. True North Insight has come about in many ways because of Joseph and the Insight Meditation Society. Some of the founders—Pascal, who is on the other side of Joseph, myself, and David Shuella, who I think is somewhere in the audience—met at IMS when we were practicing long retreats and volunteering back in the nineties. Inspired by IMS, we wanted to create a Canadian retreat center like it, one that could offer retreats in French as well as English and be grounded in our unique Canadian culture. We wanted to grow the Dharma on our soil, and we wanted to support the maturing of people in practice and train teachers who could speak to the experience of Canadians.

So in 2003, we decided to create TNI here in Canada, and we offered our inaugural retreat in 2006. After fourteen years, we've accomplished a lot, and yet we feel that our organization is very young, vibrant, and growing. Although we have not established a dedicated retreat center and we're using rented spaces in different parts of Quebec and Ontario, that's actually given us a lot of flexibility for more diverse offerings.

Just to name a few things we're doing: we now have seventeen retreats a year in different retreat centers; we have regular daylong retreats in different parts of Montreal, in French and in English; we have long-term study and practice programs, for now offered in English, but we hope to expand that; there are nine weekly sittings in French and English in Montreal, Ottawa, and near Guelph; we have a prison meditation outreach program, which is growing and supporting inmates in their practice while in prison and also after they leave; and we have a Circle of Giving campaign, which we're inviting you to join to support our growth. If you want to learn more about that, if you want to speak to one of the board members, please look for a person wearing a little tag who will be a board member or somebody closely associated with True North Insight and speak to us either tonight or tomorrow.

So again, thank you all for being here.

---

My name is Pascal Auclair. I am one of the teachers of Voix Boréale, one of the founding members as well. A few words in French to warmly welcome you, as it is the tradition in Voix Boréale. We really like to welcome everyone, whatever your story is, the story of your people, the mother tongue that you speak, whatever your sexual orientation, gender, your socioeconomic situation, your weight, your level of ability or your physical abilities. Whatever your age. With hair and without hair. On the way.

The birth of this non-profit organization called Voix Boréale took place in large part because of the Insight Meditation Society that Joseph founded himself several decades ago. We met there and we wanted to offer similar services, the same quality of teaching, in Quebec, in Ontario, in this region of Canada. And so now, today, and for several years already, we offer many retreats per year—seventeen retreats this year. We have a program in prison that is always growing, weekly sittings in different cities including several in Montreal. We also offer daylong retreats. There are a lot of things going on with Voix Boréale, so you are here tonight to hear from Joseph and to support this organization. Thank you for doing it.

There will also be, after tonight and tomorrow, the sale of books.

Joseph has written several books, and if you are interested, you can purchase them. He will even sign them—something like that will happen. Suspense.

We ask you, please, to turn off your cell phones. Very important. They're going on retreat.

At the end of the evening, please return the equipment used for simultaneous translation. And also, Gilbert will be taking some pictures for Voix Boréale. If you don't want to be in the picture, please raise your hand, and Gilbert will identify you and not point the camera in your corner. It's just for tonight, and there will be very few pictures taken.

If a friend of yours has a translating device, please help them bring it back at the end. That's a way to support our organization.

I am very happy to welcome Joseph, who perhaps many of you know through his voice and his teaching. He has been teaching since 1974. We are fortunate to have here in Montreal someone with deep knowledge of what he is going to talk about, and who is also here to support us and our organization generously.

We have entered a field of generosity. You offer—you pay to come here—and it makes the organization grow. Joseph offers his time generously. So that's what's already happening. We are already in the Dharma, in the teachings.

It is a real honor. We're very lucky. There aren't many groups who get him this year. And so he's here.

Joseph, all yours.

*Merci.* Thank you, Pascal. We had a lovely afternoon at Bota Bota, so if I'm feeling a little too relaxed this evening, forgive me.

I thought we might start with a short sitting meditation. I'll guide it a little for those of you who may not be familiar with the practice—just for ten or fifteen minutes.

Sit comfortably, but not too comfortably. It's best if your feet are flat on the floor, sitting somewhat upright.

And often in this tradition, we sit with our eyes closed, but it's also possible to sit with the eyes slightly open, so whichever you prefer.

Simply settling into the awareness of the body, the body sitting. Just sit and know you're sitting. It can be that simple.

And as you sit and know you're sitting, you might become aware of some background ambient noise or sound. Simply be aware of that in the background. You'll be aware of my voice. Settle into the awareness of the body, the body sitting, the body posture—the awareness that there is a body.

As you know the body's sitting, feeling it, you might become aware of your body breathing. Quite a natural process. There's no need to narrowly focus on the breath. Rather, feel the body breathing within the framework of the whole body sitting. No need to force the breath or breathe in any certain way. You simply know you're sitting and you feel the natural rhythm of the body breathing. As the body breathes in, know you're breathing in. As the body breathes out, know you're breathing out. It's that simple.

As you sit and know you're sitting, you'll be aware of different sounds—the background ambient sounds, the sound of my voice, other sounds in the room. You'll be aware of the body breathing, simply staying relaxed and alert at the same time.

When the mind is attentive, you may notice different thoughts or images pass through the mind. See if you can notice the thought or image when it arises. You might even make a small acknowledgement—*thinking* or *seeing*—silently in the mind. If the mind gets carried away in a train of thought, a train of association, as soon as you become aware, simply come back to the body sitting. Sit and know you're sitting. Feeling the body, feeling the breath.

Let the mind and body be relaxed and also alert. Aware of the body sitting, aware of sound. Aware of the body breathing. Aware or mindful of different thoughts or images as they appear and disappear in the mind.

Well, you just attended a ten-day meditation course. It's basically that simple—just practicing that. And of course, as we do, it begins to deepen into different levels of understanding.

So this evening I wanted to talk a little bit about compassion and equanimity in challenging times. It seems these times are rather challenging on many levels—what's happening in the various political realms, the tremendous upheaval in the Middle East, the refugee crisis, and so many different kinds of suffering in the world.

The question really is: How can we hold this? There's so much, and especially given the immediacy and intensity of the media these days. I'm sure you feel, as I often do, that it's easy to just get overloaded with all the information, and it doesn't stop. So is there some balanced way to both be open to it, to feel responsive to it, and not get overwhelmed by it all—or to withdraw from it?

That seems to me the challenge of basically what our meditation practice is about, but it's really about applied meditation in the world. How are we using our hearts and minds in the face of all of these challenges?

It seems to me that there are two really key elements in learning how to be with all of this in a skillful way, in a wholesome way. And it has to do with the balance of equanimity and compassion.

Now, we may hear more in our lives about compassion. A lot of people are engaged in very compassionate response to situations and doing a lot of great work. We probably hear less about the importance of equanimity. Just as a word and as a value, it seems to have a somewhat lesser presence in our consciousness. And yet understanding equanimity, I think, is the key to being able to respond compassionately in all kinds of situations without going to overwhelm, without being overcome by it all.

So what is equanimity?

In the way that we use the term, one might think of equanimity as that mind space of impartiality, where the mind is simply open to see things as clearly as we can in their totality—the good, the bad, the difficult, the challenging, the easeful. In that way, it could be likened to space. Space holds everything. Space doesn't discriminate between this and that. It's just the space that contains everything. Equanimity has that quality in the mind—that quality of spaciousness that is non-reactive. It doesn't jump to conclusions or to conditioned reactivity in ourselves. It's that space, and it's really an easefulness of mind that's open, spacious, seeing as best as possible the totality of what's going on.

Now, this does not imply non-discernment. It's not a kind of vague settling back, a deluded sense that everything's okay. That's not equanimity—that's just fog. Equanimity is very alive, bright, clear, balanced, open, and it can discern what's what, because it's seeing everything. It's not one-sided, not coming from a partial point of view. In that respect, equanimity is the absolutely necessary groundwork for wisdom, the foundation for wisdom.

As we're facing or confronting difficult situations—whether personally, in our own lives, in our relationships, in our work, in the world, politically, socially—when we're confronting difficult situations, really the key question we need to ask is: what is the most effective means for addressing this situation, for addressing this problem? We could be moved by compassion to do something, but if we're not clear about what needs to be done, or what can be done, or what we're able to do, then very likely we can just go in and muddle things even more. It's equanimity which gives us that first stable platform within ourselves from which we can see, assess, and discern. There's this situation that needs addressing—maybe some injustice or inequality or political mess, whatever it may be. We're seeing it, seeing the totality of it, and we ask the question: what's the most effective way of responding? Do you see the importance of this before jumping in?

One question is: how do we find this space? I think most of us who have been somewhat introspective in our lives are not unaware of how quickly reactive our hearts and minds can be. We see something or hear something on the news, some political situation—of which we now have many south of the border—and it's so easy to just jump right into a reactive judgment. "I hate this." Or whatever it might be. So the question is: are there some tools, even little tools, remembrances, little reflections, that can help bring us back from that quick reactivity to a place of greater equanimity? "Okay, this is what's happening. Can I see it? Can I take it in? Can I understand it in its fullness?"

There are two little tricks of the trade that I've found helpful in even remembering what equanimity is about. In the moment, it's very easy to just get caught up in our initial reactions. One thing that's very important to remember, in general in life, as we navigate all the many ups and downs and twists and turns and challenges and difficulties of our lives: we need to remember that a vast majority of what happens in our lives is completely outside of our control. We would like to think that we are the center of the universe, and that what we want and desire and what we'd like should be how things are—because it's obvious that they would be the right things to do. But as you've probably noticed, the world is not quite organized that way. We actually are not at the center of the universe. We are simply a part of this great mysterious whole, and things

happen on every plane, every level, and in every circumstance through a vast multitude of conditions. In Buddhist terminology, it's always talked about how causes and conditions give rise to things happening.

Just a very simple example: yesterday, flying up to Montreal, I get to the airport—plane delayed an hour. An hour's not too bad. An hour goes by, then it's delayed another hour. Meanwhile, the flight afterwards was canceled. The weather was quite bad in Boston yesterday.

Another hour goes by, delayed further. And there were people making connecting flights to Europe and out to Calgary and going all over the place. It was just very interesting to watch the different reactions. This was a very impersonal situation. No one had any control of it—it was the weather. They said there was one runway under construction. It was just causes and conditions.

And it was very interesting to see the difference between getting stressed about it and having at least some measure of equanimity. "Okay, this is happening. It's outside of my control. There's nothing I can do about it. Okay, sit back, relax, breathe." Huge difference. And this is about a very small thing. So just imagine being able to apply that same principle in much more challenging situations—to remember, to realize, whatever our feelings may be about it, very often it is outside of our control to do anything about it. We don't have the capacity to do something about it. And so that just helps us understand the bigger picture, to relax.

But right here is a key point in understanding equanimity, and it's what leads into compassion. Very often, people will make the assumption or will somehow make the inner move from the understanding, "Yes, the world is not ordered the way I would like it to be. A lot of things are happening that I don't like, often for good reasons. I don't have control over what's happening." So right here is the key point, because very often people will move from that understanding to indifference. "Oh, I can't do anything about it." And so we kind of retreat into just a kind of indifference about what's going on in the world. And they confuse indifference with equanimity.

So it's extremely important to see that these are two very different things. In Buddhist terminology, indifference is called the near enemy of equanimity, because it looks like equanimity superficially, but it is actually a completely different state. Indifference is withdrawn—we're pulling back. Equanimity is like space. Equanimity is holding everything with discernment. So be watchful of that. Developing equanimity is essential, and we have to realize a lot of things are outside of our control. And yet we don't need to fall back into indifference.

Just another element which I find extremely interesting, and I use this a lot in my life in terms of strengthening equanimity: when I find myself caught up in some drama or other, some reactivity or other—it could be personal, it could be organizational, it could be societal, global, on whatever level—one of the things I really love to do is read history. And I just find it very interesting to look back historically.

One of the examples I give: some years ago, maybe five years ago now, I read this amazing book about Genghis Khan—thirteenth century or something like that. He ruled most of Asia and into Europe. He was probably the most powerful person on Earth at that time, controlled the lives of millions and millions of people. Cities were destroyed. A huge force on the planet.

So I'd like to ask you a very pointed question now: How many of you have thought about Genghis Khan today? Probably not too many of you. Because in the long sweep of history, even given the immense influence and power—and some of it was for good and a lot of it was for destruction—but huge, huge influence. In the long course of history, it was there and powerful and impactful, and a lot of suffering involved. And now we hardly even think about him.

And then you might even think of geological time. When we expand our view of time, of history—whether it's individual history, or of countries, of civilizations, of the Earth itself, of species arising and passing—we get a really big picture. Really big. Four and a half billion years, the sun's going to explode. Goodbye Earth.

I don't know—I just find that it enlarges everything. And it doesn't mean going to indifference. I'm going to explain a little bit about how we don't go to indifference. But it provides a frame, a very big frame, for holding it all with balance and with connectedness and with greater ease, where we don't get so tight or contracted or stressed in the face of these very real challenges.

The avenue for not getting caught in indifference, for not falling into indifference, is compassion. And what does compassion mean? Compassion is that feeling that is aware of the suffering going on and wants to do something about it. It's that feeling that wants to alleviate the suffering.

Equanimity actually opens us to the full range of what's there. We let it in, we see it, but from a place of balance, not from a place of our own contracted reactivity. And then what we can notice is that out of that equanimity, the heart and mind begin increasingly to respond quite spontaneously with compassion to the suffering that we see, that we're involved with.

Compassion actually comes when we're willing to come close to suffering. And our tendency is not to. I think it's important not to assume that the totality of our conditioning is compassion. There may be a lot there, but there's also a lot in our conditioning that pulls away from pain. We can see it in our own bodies and very clearly in meditation practice.

Those of you who have been involved in meditation of some kind will know this very well. How often, when you're sitting and you feel some strong pain in the back or the knee or the shoulders, how often is your first response, "Oh good, this is a chance for me to be with pain"? That's probably not the first reaction. Maybe we'll get there. But the first conditioned reaction to pain is "I don't like this." We have aversion to it. It's a pulling away.

We can extrapolate that to all the suffering in the world, of which we hear so much. Often there is an immediate compassionate response, but sometimes it can just be too much. We can feel the aversion, not wanting to come close, needing to protect ourselves a little bit. It's really helpful just to become aware of all this—without judgment, without self-judgment. We're simply watching the conditioning of our hearts, of our minds, in the face of suffering, knowing that compassion arises from a willingness, a practiced willingness, to come close to suffering.

Just as with the pain in meditation, we may have an initial reaction, but then we remind ourselves: okay, it's okay. Let me just feel it. It's okay to feel pain. It's okay to feel unpleasant. And so we can feel the heart and mind soften, settle into it, feel it. We can do the same thing with the suffering we come face to face with in the world. Even if at first we feel a little distant, we can remind ourselves: let me open to this, let me feel it, it's okay that I feel this suffering.

What happens from that is a very powerful inner transformation, a development. The more willing we are, through practice—this does not happen just in a moment; we need to undertake it as a practice—but the more willing we are to open to the suffering that's there, what happens is a tremendous development of empathy. We actually begin to feel the suffering of another because we were willing to come close to it. If we remain at a distance or just know it intellectually, it often doesn't drop into the heart. We may know that the suffering is there, but we don't necessarily have that empathetic feeling for what that person or people or group are actually going through.

It's a very beautiful process. Equanimity, developed to some extent, gives us the balance. It creates the spaciousness in our minds, in our hearts, to see the totality of what's there—and the ability then to begin practicing coming closer to the difficult. Sometimes what's going on in the world is really painful, and sometimes what's happening in

ourselves or with people really close to us. The equanimity gives us the strength to actually be able to come close, to open to it, to see: yes, this is what's here. The coming close to suffering, in a very beautifully transforming way, opens the heart empathetically to what the other person, the group of people, or ourselves are going through.

And then out of that empathy, the key question of compassionate action arises. I think this is where compassion and equanimity come together so beautifully. Because really, the question that crystallizes compassionate response is a phrase that comes from a book title written years ago by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. It was a book on compassion, and the title, which I loved, was *How Can I Help?*

How can I help? I find that phrase just captures everything I've been talking about. It's like the equanimity of discernment.

The equanimity allows us to come close to the suffering that's really in our lives. We feel more empathy. And then we ask that question: Well, how can I help? Is there something I can do?

If we hold that question and are really motivated by compassion, by wanting to alleviate suffering, many unexplored possibilities begin to open themselves—things we may not have thought of, ways we might be able to help. Just holding the question itself becomes transformative.

Are you familiar with the term *koan* in Japanese Buddhism? It's a little phrase or a problem that's held in the heart. You hold it and hold it, and it doesn't seem to have a very specific rational answer, but it contains within it the seed of really great wisdom. So "How can I help?" becomes almost like a compassionate koan. This is what we can bring to the world—just holding that question. And then seeing, because opportunities present themselves all the time, in big ways and in little ways. How can I help? I've found this whole practice to be tremendously enlivening.

Just as equanimity can slide into indifference, there's a key point with compassion that needs our attention. It's very easy for compassion to slip into its near enemy, where we think it's compassion but it's really not. This happens first when it goes to sorrow. In the face of seeing so much suffering in the world, it's very easy to become overwhelmed by the sorrow of it all—especially given the immediacy of the media and the images we encounter. Sometimes it's heartbreaking what we're seeing and becoming aware of, and it's very easy to go into sorrow.

But sorrow is not compassion.

What I'm about to say is really a subtlety of discernment, and you would need to investigate this carefully for yourself, test it for yourself. Don't necessarily just believe it. But I've found it very interesting that in this quality of sorrow overwhelm, there is a thread or an element of aversion to the suffering. We don't like the suffering so much. There's so much aversion to it, and to feeling it, that we just go into overwhelm. That's a very different feeling than what arises in our heart when we hold the question in the face of suffering: How can I help?

Can you feel the difference just now? If "How can I help?" is what's present, even in the face of suffering, that's uplifting—because we're engaged, and we're engaged in a positive and discerning way. Being overwhelmed or going to aversion just leads to despair. And it doesn't help us, and it doesn't help anybody else.

So this is basically the framework I wanted to present this evening. I hope you've gotten some sense of both the importance of equanimity and compassion, how the one supports the other, and the dangers in each—that equanimity doesn't go to indifference, that compassion doesn't go to sorrow—and that we use both of these qualities to really help us engage in our own lives and in the world in a meaningful way, in a way that can be of service.

For the rest of the evening, my intention was simply to open it for discussion or comment. The theme of how to live in these challenging times seems very relevant for all of us, and I would be interested in any questions or comments you may have.

*A participant named Elaine speaks:* I'm from Ottawa, and I'm very happy to be here today. I'm really grateful for your words. I'm wondering if you could provide some guidance on the question "How can I help?" in the sense of how we can help ourselves before helping others. As an action-oriented person, I find myself helping all around the city, always, sometimes to the detriment of my own personal energy. It becomes a deteriorating process. I often hear about the importance of public service, which is something I wholly embrace—and potentially a little too much. I would love your insight and guidance.

That's a very common situation and a common problem. Years ago, I was teaching quite a number of retreats for environmental and social activists—intensive meditation retreats. They weren't an easy group. I thought it was... I loved doing it. But the biggest problem that people had in their lives was burnout. They were so engaged and so active and, just as you said, not taking care of themselves. It wasn't sustainable.

So it became very clear to them, being on retreat and taking that time for themselves, that this was an essential piece of self-care. You absolutely have to take some time—some quiet time in one way or another—to relax, to let go, to recharge. Of course, meditation—I'm a little bit biased—but I have found it to be an amazingly effective way to clear out and to recharge.

Another key piece of this, and it's what I referred to when I was talking about compassion: it's really important for you to watch your mindset when you're engaged in social action. It's not uncommon at all for people to respond to all kinds of injustice—whether it's environmental or racial or economic, injustice on so many levels—with anger. It's so easy and natural to respond with anger at the injustice. But that anger is not a sustainable energy to effect action. It can be a powerful initial charge for engagement, but it became very clear, and to these people on retreat also, that anger just burns one up.

So we need to find another motive for engaging in action. It doesn't have to be anger at the injustice. And this also takes some practice, because we have to really understand the conditioning of our own minds—how our minds are working, how they've been conditioned to react to situations. And the fact that conditioning is not fixed in stone. We can see that conditioning which is serving us and see that conditioning which is not serving us.

If we begin to see, "Yeah, my response, even past the initial kind of outrage—I'm just being fueled in all my work by this anger"—if we can begin to see that and realize this is not healthy for us, and in the long run it's not going to be effective for what we want to do, then we can begin to move. We can begin to change our conditioning more to that place of "How can I help?" "How can I help?" is not an angry question. It's really a question of compassion.

There are so many outstanding examples of people who were able to do this. The iconic figure in certainly American culture for this is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Watching some of the videos of the marches, the civil rights marches—surrounded, both in North and South, by people filled with hatred towards him—it was amazing to see. And somehow, he could do all the work he did from a place of love. It was amazing. So it's an example of what we can be practicing.

That's the other part of it: taking time to take care of yourself is not taking time away from your work. It's making your work possible. And then to see the quality of your heart and mind, how you're engaging in the work. So those are the two things that come to mind.

*A participant asked about fear: if anger is a flashpoint, it's often a substitute for fear or a transformation of it. But anger can burn itself out a lot faster. Fear can simmer. And the world is a fearsome place. Given that fear may be more hardwired into us, what can you suggest in the face of that?*

Also another great question. At least in the meditative realm—this may be putting it too boldly—but I'm an expert in fear. Of all the various afflictive emotions that came up in my practice, that was the one that was by far the most difficult and the most pervasive. So I worked a lot with it over many, many years.

I learned a lot from all those years of practicing with fear. The key learning, which will hopefully save you many years, happened in a moment—though that moment was the fruit of many years of practice.

There were times when the fear was so strong in me, so irrational, that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. Completely irrational. But that emotion was, for whatever reason—my conditioning, past lives, whatever—that's what was coming up. It was debilitating fear. And then I saw it played out in less dramatic ways in many interactions, where fear would be the first response.

After practicing with it for a long time across many retreats, at one point—and many of you who have heard my talks may have heard this story—I was just doing walking meditation on retreat, and something shifted in my relationship to fear. The shift was expressed in a sentence that arose in my mind: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay."

That "it's okay" became my magic mantra with fear.

What I realized in that moment was that what had been making fear such a powerful force in my life was my aversion and non-acceptance of it. Because it's a very unpleasant emotion. And just as with physical pain, our initial reaction is "I don't like this, I want it to go away"—with fear even more so than physical pain. It's such an unpleasant emotion that the tendency is always "I don't like this, I want this to go away." Even when I thought I was being mindful, because I'd been practicing with fear for so long—noting "fear, fear, fear"—underneath it was always "go away."

What was so interesting, and I learned this the hard way, is that resisting something or having aversion to something actually feeds it. So all that time I thought I was being mindful, I was actually strengthening the fear through my aversion to it.

When I finally—and this took a long time—could say "it's okay," when I could recognize it as an unpleasant feeling and still say "it's okay, it's okay to feel it," when my heart really relaxed into the okayness of the feeling, it was amazing. The whole congestion of fear broke up and passed through.

This does not mean that fear never arises again or disappeared forever. But since that time, I've been much more skilled in simply allowing it to be there, feeling it, letting it come and go. Because like everything else, fear is an impermanent, changing mind state, an emotion that is not always there. It comes when conditions create it and then fades away.

So I would suggest this: the particular gift of this magic mantra comes with its price of admission. "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. Just let me feel it." Your relationship to the fear is what unlocks it.

---

"First of all, thank you for the teaching. I really appreciate framing compassion in terms of equanimity, this idea of discernment and what is effective. Especially as a Buddhist, or as someone wanting to be helpful, the question of 'how can I help?' doesn't always have an obvious answer—especially to the person or being you might want to help. And tied to the first question and your answer that touched on this: one of the real challenges we have right now is there's so much aggression in the world, and there's a lot of aggression reacting to that aggression. Very aware, educated, rightfully angry aggression. I find myself balancing wanting to understand that with the flip side—Chögyam Trungpa used to talk about idiot compassion, doing the thing you think is going to help that doesn't help at all. How to actually find that space of equanimity is, to me, the biggest challenge. I mean, the person who probably needs the most help in the world right now is in charge of it, so to speak. And there aren't many people who seem to want to help him. How do you find space for him in your heart?"

There's a lot in your question, and it is a very pressing question for many people. Taking it down a level—relating to people in your life who perhaps represent that viewpoint, and noticing that tendency of anger or aggression toward an aggressive worldview—I think the first step we can take is really to listen. Because it's so easy to go to immediate reactivity and not even begin to try to understand: "Okay, how in the world can these people be supporting this person, these policies, whatever?"

So instead of closing off right away, I think that's the challenge—and sometimes it's really challenging. Can we just try to listen and try to understand? What's behind it? Because nobody's going to change because of your aggressive reaction to them. Aggression just builds aggression, and it doesn't go anyplace.

So that's in terms of not the big guy at the top—probably you won't have an opportunity in that one-on-one way. But maybe there are some people in your life you can practice with. Because even in small ways, to actually practice that possibility of listening to people you profoundly disagree with, people you think are doing really harmful things—I don't know—at least see if there's a possibility of establishing some level of connection just through listening. "Okay, what's behind this? Why does that person have that view or way of thinking?"

In terms of relating to the top guy, it's a challenge. But years ago, when I was first teaching—this was in 1974, 1975, at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado—it was a Buddhist institution, now it's a Buddhist university, but at that time it was just a summer school started by Chögyam Trungpa. So I was teaching there, and I remember this one Hindu yogi was passing through. His name happened to be Ram Dass, but not the American Ram Dass. He said something—I didn't know him beforehand, I've never seen him since, it was just a passing connection—but he said one thing that has stuck with me all these years. It landed somewhere deeply.

This will be a paraphrase because it was that many years ago, but he said something like: when he looks at the world, he doesn't see war, he doesn't see violence, he doesn't see injustice—he sees ignorance. What struck me was that just reframing it in that way changes our response. We can get really angry at the manifestations and the people doing all these things, but when we really drill down to the root of why people are doing such harmful things, it's all coming out of a profound ignorance of the effect of their actions.

But what is the response to ignorance? Does it make sense to get angry at ignorance? Or does it make sense—in whatever way is possible, and sometimes it's beyond anything we can do—to awaken people from their ignorance? That's what's going to be effective. That's a very different inner standpoint.

So just one more story, somewhat related to this. Just after 9/11, I was teaching a retreat in New York—not the city, upstate—but there were a lot of New Yorkers on the retreat. We were doing the loving-kindness meditation. Most of you may be familiar with it: the practice of mettā, starting with oneself, then a benefactor, a friend, a neutral person, then the enemy—somebody who's difficult—and then to all beings.

This was just after 9/11, and of course the question came up as we got to spreading loving wishes to the difficult people, to the enemies. Many people were saying, "There is no way that I can send mettā, loving-kindness, to these people who just flew those planes into the buildings." That was not even a remote possibility.

So that became very interesting to me as a teacher trying to understand. The Buddha talked about mettā as being universal, that it really can be and should be extended to everyone. So how is it possible to understand that universal application in a situation like this? That was a koan—a real inquiry. It took me a little while. I was reflecting on this for quite some time, and then I realized there is a way, and it's related back to the seeing of ignorance. There is a way to send mettā even in that situation, to the terrorists.

It's still going on in terrible ways. But wouldn't it be possible to extend the wish to everyone: May you be free of hatred? Is there anybody we would exclude from that wish? May you be free of hatred. May you be free of ill will. May you be free of greed.

When you get to the root causes of all these destructive actions, it's always some unwholesome mind state that's driving the action. So the metta is not "Oh, may you be happy, may you be well." Those words, those phrases are not going to cut it. But if you get to the heart of it, the metta is absolutely appropriate. May you be free of hatred. May all beings be free of hatred and all the actions that come from hatred.

I think that's the level we have to approach this. May all of our leaders be free of ignorance, be free of delusion. And if that's the space we're coming from in ourselves, and we practice that, then it might open possibilities of ways of responding that would not be clear if we were just consumed by anger.

As I said, equanimity and compassion in challenging times. A questioner wanted to bring this to a more personal level where it feels like it's maybe even harder to work with. The question had to do with how to deal with great grief in the suffering of people you're close to, like your children. When the equanimity phrase that they were hearing was "May I accept things just as they are," their first reaction was, "There's just no way." There's just a deep grief. So how do you work with that situation where equanimity seems theoretical or cold, and yet there's a sense that there's a solution there, but it just doesn't seem immediately available?

That brings one right to the edge of one's practice, that situation. It's a profound question. What came to mind as they were speaking was that it would be really interesting to observe the energy of your relationship right in those moments when you're

with the suffering. What's the quality of your energy? What's the quality of your heart when you're not accepting it, versus when you've come to some level of acceptance, to "Okay, this is how it is"?

I offer this not as a conclusion, just as a possible investigation. But the non-acceptance of whatever the situation is—the feeling I got was that the non-acceptance was in some way an energetic closing off or pushing away from the truth of what was actually there. Understandably so, just as we're talking about fear. It's a profoundly unpleasant, distressful feeling. So the tendency is, "No, I don't want to accept this." But the non-acceptance—you can almost feel the contracting away from the situation.

What would be the possibility? Experiment with this in yourself. What's it like, even for a few moments, if the heart actually can say, "This is how it is"? There's a lot of suffering here, and there can be a huge amount of love and compassion. My sense is that that love and compassion will actually be manifest and expressed more on the energetic level—not through words or what you're doing, but just through the energy within you. That love and compassion will flow much more freely in the acceptance rather than in the non-acceptance. Does this make sense?

The questioner acknowledged there's a level of aversion, and that it's tight and closing off. But the question remains: How do you actually get there when it seems almost like an idea? And then: What do you do with grief?

In a way, it's the same question, and the same process. And it is a process—it's not necessarily immediate. But in the face of really difficult, unpleasant, painful experiences, whether physical sensations or emotions, the process is reminding oneself, almost coaching oneself: "It's okay, just let me feel it." It's getting okay to feel the pain of it. Because the conditioned reaction is not to want to feel the pain of it—it's too painful. So it's a practice, but it's a practice that you can do.

And for me, there is a difference between sadness and sorrow.

Sadness is a natural feeling about conditions. When we see suffering, there is natural sadness. Sorrow has, in my experience, a self-referential component to it. It's about me. It's my sorrow.

And so I'll just share my own experience of how I work with that, which may be relevant or it may not be to your situation.

When I feel sad in seeing the world, the wars, the conflicts, the injustices—there's tremendous sadness about it. But when I can feel it as just the sadness of the human condition, without making it about me, without making it about my sorrow, it doesn't become depressing. It's a natural human response to suffering, but it doesn't pull us down into the despair that sorrow can.

What you described in the corporate world is such a prevalent situation. The amount of suffering that's created in work environments by people who are, as you said, themselves wounded. And the challenge is—and I think this is what you're pointing to—how do we hold compassion for those who are creating the suffering?

This is such a hard practice. It's relatively easy to feel compassion for the obvious victims. But to feel compassion for the one who's doing the harm—this requires a kind of seeing that goes beyond the behavior to the pain that's driving it.

In my experience, what helps is to remember that nobody harms from a place of genuine well-being. Nobody who is truly happy, truly at peace, causes suffering to others. So when we see someone inflicting pain, we can know with certainty that they are in pain themselves. They may not know it. They may be completely unconscious of it. But the behavior itself is evidence of the suffering.

And really understanding that difference has been helpful for me, because I experience sadness as something—I don't even know the right words—it feels like an authentic and true response to many situations. Many situations are sad. And that feels like just a very human response and emotion. That's really how I'm defining the term, so people may use these words differently than I'm using them. Keep that in mind.

But in the way that I hear and use the word sorrow, there's much more a feeling of what I was talking about before—aversion to the situation and overwhelm. Even the phrase "overwhelmed by sorrow." Whereas sadness... I've been in situations that have been incredibly sad, and maybe this is going to sound a little strange, but sometimes it's like I almost find the beauty in sadness, in the emotion. There's something—you may know what I'm talking about—there can be something just deeply meaningful and poignant and beautiful in the experience of feeling sad about something. And it feels like a very different emotion than sorrow.

So that distinction may actually allow you to feel the sadness and not think that it shouldn't be there, without falling into the overwhelm or the heaviness of sorrow. And again, it comes back to: in the situation, is there something to do? Is there something I can do in this situation or not? But in either case, I think the sadness is often a very appropriate response.

*What about the compassion towards the people inflicting the pain?*

The compassion would take the form—well, it could take many forms, it can take different forms. One is just as I was saying with the mettā and the suicide bombers: may you be free of hatred. That really is a compassionate wish, because the hatred is the cause of their suffering. Not only the cause of their suffering, but the cause of them acting in ways that cause so much suffering. And so when we have that wish for them—may you be free of hatred, may you be free of ignorance, may you be free of all the causes in the mind that cause these actions, that result in these actions—that's a compassionate wish. And it's the only one that really makes sense. Do we want to say, "Oh, feel more hatred. Feel angrier"? It doesn't make sense.

And so that's why when we understand really how compassion works, it is the only appropriate response to these situations. And it has nothing—it has zero to do with condoning these actions. That's not what it's about. It's: how do we get to alleviate or uproot the causes of these actions? And that's the challenge for us.

The Buddha expressed one very well-known phrase which we can see play out all over the world. The truth of it is so obvious, and yet we get caught in it again and again and again. He said this 2,600 years ago, and many people have expressed similar views since then: hatred never ceases by hatred. It only ceases by love.

And we can just see it. If there's a lot of hatred and then other people respond with hatred, what happens? The whole thing just keeps escalating and never comes to an end. So there has to be a way of, in the face of hatred, coming at it from a different angle—coming at it from underneath, so to speak—not just meeting it with more hatred, because that just inflames everything.

But this is challenging. There's a reason all of this is called practice. This is not easy. We are confronting the deepest patterns of our conditioning—not only our personal psychological conditioning, but the conditioning of our culture. There are whole cultures based on revenge. That's the cultural norm. Or cultures based on greed. We're all very familiar with that.

So as we're dealing with these challenging times, these are not easy matters. But the response, the appropriate response, is also not complicated.

As my first Dharma teacher would say very often about many things, it's simple but not easy. It's not complicated once we understand how the mind and heart are working and can see what's skillful and what's unskillful, what's helping and what's not helping.

But to change the habit patterns of our conditioning—that takes practice. That's not an easy thing to do, and that's why it requires a certain amount of dedication. But I really feel that this is what is going to help the world.

*Question: You've spoken several times about the impact of aversion, and I'm very sensitive to that, resonating with it personally as you talk about it—how central working with aversion is to working effectively with these challenges. I'm wondering if you could say more about what gives rise to that. If compassion is such a natural thing, if we're social animals who naturally feel empathy, yet it gets so easily hijacked by an unwillingness to feel certain things, and the consequences can be so deep. Perhaps you could speak a little more to that and offer some more wisdom about how to deal with it.*

First, there is a good side to aversion. It's helpful to know and recognize that. Because each of these mind states—and again, this is within the Buddhist way of understanding the mind—each of these unwholesome mind states of greed, hatred, aversion, and delusion have a positive flip side. And the positive flip side of aversion is discernment. We have a phrase for aversive personalities: generally, they are seeing things pretty clearly. They have a very discerning mind.

So the question then is first to value that. Don't dismiss the clarity of what you're seeing just because that aversive conditioning is there. Do you follow? You really want to value it. "I'm seeing something pretty clearly. My mind hates it, but I'm seeing it pretty clearly." You're valuing that.

And then, really, the core—which I've mentioned a few times now—the very core conditioning for aversion is our unwillingness or non-acceptance of what's unpleasant. This goes very deep. We all like what's pleasant and don't like what's unpleasant. And most of our lives, this is what we're doing. As best we can, we keep going after the pleasant and trying to avoid the unpleasant.

Well, that is a very tiring, ultimately unsatisfying life strategy, because there is no way as human beings of avoiding the unpleasant. Our life is a mix, and it is a mix for everybody. This is so clear in terms of the process of this aging body. I just turned seventy-three five days ago. First, it's unbelievable. Two, who asked for this? All of this stuff is going on outside of one's control, and aversion to the unpleasant aspects of it only adds suffering. It's like attachment and love—the aversion doesn't help the situation in any way.

So it's realizing that the aversion can see clearly—yes, this is what's going on. You value that. But then comes the practice: it's okay. It's okay to feel unpleasant.

A teaching that the Buddha gave, which I've found very helpful, addresses the nature of the body, but it could apply to many circumstances of our lives. This teaching is like a diamond—if we really get this, it will save us years of suffering. This is a core, pith teaching. It's a reflection:

*What is subject to illness will grow ill, and I am not exempt. What is subject to aging will age, and I am not exempt. What is subject to death will die, and I am not exempt.*

For me, the startling revelation of that reflection was that even after having taught this stuff for forty years, I still feel like I am exempt. Or if not that I am exempt, that I should be exempt. And it is such a powerful reminder: this is just the nature of things. It's not personal. This is the Dharma.

But our tendency is to have aversion to this because it's unpleasant. That's the deep conditioning. So we need all different ways in practice to counter that conditioning, because that's the conditioning of delusion.

I love that I can just be walking, going for a walk, and all of a sudden—oh, my knee. And I am not exempt. It just reminds me, okay, this is what's happening. And then I take care of it the best way I can. It doesn't mean not taking care, but it's a different level of understanding and acceptance.

I want to set a very high bar for what the practice is really about. This is a teaching of the Buddha that always makes me sit up straight. We can be going along and doing our practice and getting, hopefully, a lot of benefit from it. But he said one thing that just... He said, "As long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible."

That is a powerful statement, given the strength of conditioning of attachment to pleasant and aversion to unpleasant. But rather than it seeming like, "Oh my God, I'll never get there," I take it more as an instruction for the little moments. Just little moments of pleasant, little moments of unpleasant. Can I remember that? Okay, can I practice with pleasant? Great, just be with it without the grasping. Little moments of unpleasant—I am not exempt. Can I just be with it? In that way, we're actually practicing liberation all along the way, rather than seeing it as just some far-off goal.

I don't know whether you get the sense, but everything we've been talking about this evening is huge. It's just huge. It's the entirety of our lives and the lives of everybody on the planet—how our hearts and minds are working, the subtleties of the conditioning and habit patterns. You could call them neural pathways that have been established. And really seeing: what are the ones that are just causing more suffering for ourselves and others? What are the ones that lead out of the suffering?

This is meditation in this larger sense. You can almost substitute the word *understanding* for meditation. This is our lives. It's not a hobby. It's not, "Oh yeah, I'll meditate for half an hour a day and then go on and just live my life not paying attention." That's not what this is about. This is really about the transformation of our lives and our consciousness. And through that, hopefully, it has tremendous impact in the world.

*May all beings everywhere have hearts at peace.*

CHAPTER 32

# Compassion & Equanimity in Difficult Times, Daylong Retreat: Afternoon

Joseph Goldstein · 1h06

> *In this afternoon session of a daylong retreat, Joseph Goldstein turns attention to what he considers perhaps the most predominant sense field in our experience: the realm of thought. Drawing on the Buddhist understanding of mind as the sixth sense, he illuminates how thoughts—despite being almost insubstantial when examined directly—function as powerful dictators running our lives when we remain unaware of them.*
>
> *Goldstein offers practical guidance for working with thoughts in meditation. Rather than trying to stop thinking, the practice involves becoming aware of thoughts as close to their arising as possible, treating them simply as objects of meditation like sounds or sensations. He emphasizes the importance of highlighting the moment of awakening from being lost in thought, reframing these moments as successes rather than failures. The profound question "What is a thought?"—not what is it saying, but what is it as a phenomenon—reveals thoughts to be mere energy blips in the mind, almost nothing, yet remarkably seductive and powerful when unexamined.*
>
> *The teaching addresses how we constantly create and inhabit mind-made worlds, particularly concerning past and future, often without recognizing we are doing so. Goldstein also explores the nature of boredom as feedback about attention quality rather than a property of the object, and touches on discernment regarding when to act versus accept, the relationship between thoughts and intuition, and the deeper question of self-identity beyond our thoughts. This session provides essential tools for transforming our relationship with the thinking mind.*

This morning I mentioned how the visual field is probably the predominant sense field in which we live, and we're often not mindful of the fact that we're seeing. But really there's a sense field that's even more predominant than seeing, which I want to talk about this afternoon because it plays such an amazingly critical role in our lives and our relationships: the whole realm of thought.

In the Buddhist scheme of things, the mind is considered the sixth sense, so it's really just like another sense field. But instead of an external sense object like sounds or sights or smells, the object of this sense sphere is thought. Thought is the object of mind.

There is so much to say about thought, because for the most part, thoughts run our lives. One of the most extraordinary things to first learn about thought—and there are many things to explore—is to realize how much of the time we're lost in thought. If you go up to somebody on the street who's never meditated and ask, "Are you lost in your thoughts?" they'd probably say, "Oh no, not too much." But anybody who's ever meditated knows that probably a good part of the time we're lost in thought and carried away. We hop on these trains of association. We don't even know that we've hopped on the train. We don't know where the train is going. And then some time later—it could be a minute or two, it could be five minutes, it could be half an hour, sometimes we mull things over for days—we realize we were just lost in these trains of thought, not knowing that we're thinking. We are lost in that mind world.

It's almost like when we go to the movies and get totally absorbed in the story. Of course, the point of going to the movies is to do just that—we do want to get lost. And in that time, we forget that we're just watching a movie. Nothing is really happening. Nobody's getting chased and nobody's falling in love and nobody's getting killed. It's just pixels of light on the screen. But it's so realistic that we get caught up in the story with all the attendant emotions. You know that feeling when you come out of a movie theater and there's almost a little reality shift: "Oh yeah, that was just a movie."

Well, this is happening to us throughout our day countless times. We are getting caught up and lost in the movies of our minds with all the attendant—and sometimes very strong—emotions, forgetting that it is just a thought.

Munindraji, my first teacher, had a really wonderful line. He said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother, it's a thought." But we forget that. We're having these thoughts and we take them to be the thing itself or the person itself, rather than simply a thought in the mind. To a very large extent, we're living in these mind-created worlds that are not actually happening other than happening as a thought. That's really what's happening.

I know you've all had this experience countless times, but it's particularly striking to me when I'm outside going for a walk. It may be a beautiful day with beautiful surroundings, and then the mind will get caught up in some train of thought, some train of association. It may be three steps, five steps, ten steps where I'm not in the experience of where I am at all. I'm in that mind-created world. And then something will snap in the mind—"Oh yeah, I'm just here"—and the contrast between those two experiences is so dramatic. It's so clear that the mind had been lost to the reality of what was actually there and lost in the thought.

So it's incredibly important, not only for meditation but for our lives, that we begin to practice becoming aware that we're thinking. What's really important here is understanding that the idea is not necessarily to stop thinking. There may come times when the concentration deepens and we go through periods where thoughts are a lot less, or even the mind is free of thought for a while. But that's not really the point—that can happen. The idea in practice, especially in insight or Vipassana practice, is that when a thought arises, we become aware as close to the beginning as possible that we're thinking. Thought becomes simply another object of meditation, like a sound. We don't try to stop sounds from happening. The sound comes, we're just aware of hearing, it goes, and there's no problem. If we can be aware of thought in just that same way—a thought arises, we're aware that we're thinking, it disappears—there's no problem, no matter what the thought is.

A few things to really pay attention to as we sit with an emphasis on being aware of thoughts. One thing that I found particularly helpful: we'll be sitting and being in the body, feeling the body breathing, sounds, sensations—everything we did this morning.

And then thoughts will arise and often carry us away for some longer or shorter period of time. The tendency is, as soon as we become aware that we're thinking, to jump back to the body or the breath—"Oh, I shouldn't be thinking, coming back."

I think it's much more helpful to actually take a moment in that very moment of waking up from being lost in the thought. That moment is very revealing. That's an important moment because we've just gone, you could say, from being asleep to being awake, or from delusion to wisdom. We've been lost and then we're not lost.

So that very moment of transition is showing us experientially and immediately what the awake, aware mind is like—because we've just gone from being unaware to aware. If we highlight that moment, if we take a moment to reflect on it or just acknowledge it: "Oh, this is wakefulness. This is what wakefulness means." And it becomes so clear in contrast to the moment before when we were lost.

In the many, many times that you'll be lost and then awaken—and the good news here, which people often miss, is that for as many times as you get lost in thought, that many times do you awaken. But mostly people focus on the having been lost, and then a judgment arises: "Oh, I'm lost again. I can't meditate." Instead of: "Oh, I'm awake again. This is awakening. I'm closer to freedom."

Reframe or give emphasis to that moment of waking up. And that will happen as many times as you've been lost. This gives an uplift to the meditation rather than a self-judgmental, critical attitude for having been lost. So highlight that moment; don't jump

over it. Really take a moment to see what that's like, to contrast the difference so you're really getting it. This is wakefulness; that was delusion. It becomes very real for us what these terms mean.

The second thing which I found extremely fascinating with regard to thought is when there is a thought train going on and there's enough mindfulness to know that it's happening—like we're not totally lost in it, but for some reason there's a strong energy for it. You've probably had that experience, when the thoughts are going and you kind of know you're thinking, but you're still on the train.

A question that I have found extremely profound and beneficial is to ask: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is a thought as a phenomenon? Because it is extremely mysterious. These thoughts are arising—we have thousands of them, maybe tens of thousands a day. So it's a common experience for almost everybody. And yet almost nobody really asks the question: What is a thought? What is it as a phenomenon?

When we ask this question as a thought train is happening, it's fascinating, because when we really look—what is a thought?—we see that it's almost nothing. It's just like a little energy blip in the mind. It's so insubstantial; there's not much there.

And yet, when we are unaware that we're thinking, these thoughts have so much power. They are like little dictators in the mind. The thoughts say go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced. They're running our lives. Thoughts are running our lives, and often in a very uncritical way. The thoughts are conditioned by the various circumstances of our lives. We have the kinds of thoughts we do because of certain kinds of conditioning. If we're not aware that we're thinking, all that's happening is we're playing out the patterns of our conditioning. There's very little space for choice or freedom there. We're just acting out the thought patterns.

All of this is so remarkable because when we are aware enough to even just poke at it a little bit and ask, "What is a thought? What is this dictator in the mind?"—there's nothing there, hardly anything there. And so it really opens up a place of tremendous freedom and tremendous possibility. As we notice different patterns of thoughts, when we really understand their essential emptiness, their transparency, and we have a little bit of mindfulness, there's the possibility of making choices.

Is this thought worth cultivating? Is this thought helpful? Is this thought not helpful? Is this thought just causing a lot of suffering and confusion?

When we understand that thoughts are not fixed, that they're not solid, that they're not in some essential way who we are—when we see that they're just conditioned phenomena, quite empty of substance yet very, very seductive—that's where the challenge lies. Thoughts slip into the mind. They're not as impactful as a sound or a sensation, so they slip in and we hardly know they're there. They're very sneaky.

The thoughts sneak in, take over the mind, we're lost in them, we act out whatever they're saying, and then we find ourselves in all kinds of situations—sometimes helpful, but frequently not helpful—all because we haven't trained ourselves to really watch our minds, to watch out for thoughts arising. Again, this doesn't mean that thoughts stop coming. It means that we're aware that they've arisen. We're thinking. Just a thought.

Do you get a sense of how powerful this practice can be? It really can transform our lives because we are empowering ourselves to make choices about which thoughts are worth cultivating and which thoughts are worth letting go of. Without mindfulness, without attentiveness to this, we're just playing out whatever particular patterns of conditioning may be present.

The key element in working with thoughts in this way—and this is an element that has helped me so much in my practice in all aspects, but particularly with thoughts—is interest. It's simply taking interest in this phenomenon, because it is interesting. Something that should be so empty when we're aware of it has so much power when we're not aware of it. To me, that's a very interesting situation. This interest can lend energy to really paying attention, being very aware, practicing the awareness of thought.

Needless to say, we miss them many, many times. We get lost over and over again. But even when we get lost, pay attention to that moment when we do wake up from being lost, and highlight what that quality of awareness is like. That will reinforce the possibility of being aware of thought sooner—the more we connect with what the quality of awareness is actually like.

This is a huge field of practice and understanding, and a huge source of potential happiness in our lives.

So let's practice it for a bit. Again, we can start in the same way as we practiced this morning. As a way of settling in: there is a body. Just settling into that in an open, relaxed way. And in that space created by "there is a body," simply being open to what your experience is—the experience of the sensations of the body breathing, the experience of other sensations, really noticing whether they're pleasant or unpleasant and your reactions to them.

Set a strong intention to be aware of thoughts or images. Everything I said also applies to pictures or images in the mind; it's the same process. Have a strong intention to really be alert, to keep the radar out for the arising of thought or image. You might notice when in the thought process you do become aware. Is it at the beginning? Is it in the middle? Is it after it's already over?

If there is a train of thought going on and you're a little bit aware, you might ask that probing question: well, what is a thought? Look directly at it so you're really seeing the very nature of thought—not the content, but thought as a phenomenon.

We'll sit for about fifteen minutes. Enjoy the exploration.

As soon as you become aware of a thought or image, it might be helpful to make a soft mental note of acknowledgment—just "thinking," "seeing"—as a way to reinforce the awareness of it.

---

A student asked: "My question is, who am I if I'm not my thoughts? And when do thoughts disguise themselves as intuition or having a hunch? Is there a difference between the two?"

I think a better frame for that first question—one that gives a better handle for the investigation—is not "who am I" but "what am I." The "who" already carries an implication that there is a "who" that I am, and I just have to find it.

We don't tend to do that with the what. With the what, it's more that the question frames it in terms of exploration. Well, what's here? What's here in experience that might be me? I think just that difference of frame will help.

As you make that exploration—and all of vipassana insight meditation is really the exploration of that question—we begin to see that, contrary to expectations, there is really no one behind this process, this changing mind-body process, to whom the process belongs. So really the answer to that question is not a substantial either what or who. Rather, what we're calling "I" or calling "self" is a changing process. It's a flow. It's a flow of experience. We tend to think that the flow is happening to someone, and that's who I am. What begins to reveal itself in the course of practice is that there is no one behind the process to whom it's happening—that what we're calling self *is* the process. So that's a very short answer to a three-hour dharma talk.

What was the second question?

The second question is whether intuition or having a hunch is sometimes thought in disguise.

Sure. To say that thought is insubstantial and has no real substance is not to say that thoughts have no meaning. Thoughts carry a lot of meaning. Sometimes they're true, sometimes they're not true. Sometimes they're imbued with wisdom and understanding. Sometimes they're just the reflection of delusion. So intuition can very much come as a thought—not always, sometimes it's a feeling—but it can often come as a particular thought in the mind. And the more we're paying attention to our thoughts and to their quality in the mind, we begin to get a feel for the different kinds of thoughts that are arising. We begin to get a feel for what's an intuitive understanding versus what's just repeating old neurotic patterns.

When I was in India many years ago, very often I would have this intuition of when it was about to rain and I should take in the laundry. I learned to listen to that thought, and it was almost always right. There are more important intuitions than that, of course, but it did show that possibility.

And sometimes in meditation, insight itself is intuitive. We can be sitting and just doing what we've been doing—in the body, feeling the breath and sensations, noticing different thoughts—and all of a sudden, just from the quality of paying attention, very intuitively there can be a new understanding of something. That understanding is really intuitive; it's not something we thought out. It just came out of the matrix of our attention. And then it's there, and sometimes something very profound is understood. So intuition can definitely be a kind of thought that's really helpful.

Generally, for most people, the ratio of useless thoughts to intuitions is not fifty-fifty. Maybe for some unusual people it is.

---

*Question: First, thank you very much for your teaching. I have some challenge understanding the difference between working with thoughts and working with emotions. I know that when I recognize an anxious thought, I say hi to it and I can let it go. It's difficult sometimes because when anxiety comes up, often it's after a little while that I wasn't aware of my anxious thoughts. And in my Thich Nhat Hanh tradition practice, we are used to when an emotion like anxiety comes up, taking care of it like a child. But when do I let go of my anxious thoughts and when do I take care of them?*

That's a topic I'm going to discuss after the walking period, because working with emotions is the next big piece of the practice. So why don't you wait until then and see if it's answered in the discussion, and if not, we can address it more specifically. But that question is very much at the heart of how we work with emotions and the relation of thought to emotion, which is really interesting.

Just as a preview to that discussion: I find it totally interesting that I can be sitting, everything's peaceful, and I may have a thought of something that happened, maybe something that was unpleasant or difficult. So I'm just sitting, minding my own business, this thought comes of a difficult situation or a difficult person, and often immediately the thought will trigger an emotion.

It's like the thought arises, and the emotion is immediately there—whatever it is: annoyance or anger or irritation, or love, which could be a positive emotion. But I just get fascinated by what just happened. Because it was just a thought. It was just this little bit of nothing which triggered a storm. It's pretty interesting. So that's just one little comment on it. But we'll talk more about emotion.

*Question: I'm understanding how to accept, and I'm understanding how to act. What I'm having trouble with is the doubt I feel about my own discernment between the two—when to accept something and when to feel it's time to act. Sometimes I feel regret because I'm not sure I made the right decision, not sure if I'm trusting myself about when to act and when to accept.*

I'm a little confused by that dichotomy, because acceptance is the first step whether we act or we don't act. Acceptance is a necessary component of discernment. In other words, we have to accept what's there. We have to see what's there. Then the next step is seeing whether whatever it is—whether it's a thought to act or anything else—after we accept the fact that it's there, we're not covering it or pushing it away. We're seeing, yes, this is here. Then we need to discern: is it wholesome or is it unwholesome? We need to really examine our motivation behind the potential action. Is the motivation compassion? Is it greed? Is it aversion? It's based on that discernment that we then make the choice: do I act on it, or do I let it go?

So acceptance underlies all of it, because acceptance is simply, yes, this is here. The discernment begins to see the difference between skillful and unskillful, or wholesome and unwholesome. And that's the whole investigation of motivation, which itself is a hugely interesting area of our lives to investigate, because our motivations can be very subtle.

I think most of us are probably basically good people, and probably most of us have the belief that our motivations are basically good. Basically. But there are a lot that aren't. There's a book—this goes way back, I think it came out in the sixties, so some of you may be familiar with it—*Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis. There was one line where it says, "Self-knowledge is always bad news." There's good news to it too, but a lot of meditation is seeing the bad news, meaning we're seeing a lot of the motivations that are not so skillful. But this is tremendously important. It's much better to see that than not see it, to be living in delusion that all of our motivations are good and therefore I should just act on them.

So having the courage, really, and the interest to take a look before you act—and then to question whether I should act or shouldn't act—really depends on the motivation. And it's difficult because sometimes they're mixed. Probably very few of us are saints with totally pure motivation, and we can often see that some aspects are really wholesome while others are not.

*Follow-up: This relates to something you said last night about how we feel like we have control over things, but actually most of it is circumstance and cause—things happen, and we're not actually the ones that cause these things to happen. So when I'm trying to discern whether to act or not, is the acceptance just saying, "Oh, this is just what it is, just accept it and don't do anything"?*

No. To say that everything arises out of causes and conditions is not to say that we are not part of that flow of causes and conditions. We can't control it, because there are many causes and conditions at work. But in many situations, we can influence the outcome of things. It takes some wisdom in those situations to say, okay, is this something where I can actually have an influence, or not?

I wouldn't assume that just by saying it's all causes and conditions, we don't have a part to play—because sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. But if we do have a part to play, then it's important to really see: what is our motivation for playing that part?

The difference between influence and control—that's an important distinction to understand.

Someone then raised a question about interest and boredom. They found the practice very profound when they first heard about it, but one of their challenges was getting bored with going back and examining every thought. And it wasn't only in this practice—in vipassana, in the breath exercise, they would get bored with the practice. What advice might help face that challenge?

There are many pieces of advice I could offer here. The first is to understand what boredom actually is, because most people, I think, have the idea that boredom resides in the object. The breath is boring. Or this walking—you know, people doing walking meditation, just back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. It's so boring. But really, boredom has nothing to do with the object.

Fritz Perls, who was the founder of Gestalt psychology, had such a good definition of boredom. He said boredom is lack of attention. It's not the object. Boredom has to do with the quality of attention we're bringing to the object.

So instead of seeing boredom as a problem, you can see boredom as feedback. You could actually welcome it. When you're bored, you can be thankful, because that's telling you, "Oh, the quality of my attention right now has fallen away from the object. The attention is half-hearted." And because the attention is half-hearted, it's boring.

Then, as an experiment, with whatever you're doing—whether it's the breath, whether it's walking, whether it's attention to some external situation—see what happens if, in recognizing that, you intentionally bring your mind in close to whatever the object is, to the breath or to a step. My experience, and that of many others, is that as soon as the attention gets very close to the object, the boredom disappears.

That's why you can see people doing walking meditation on retreat, walking for half an hour, forty-five minutes, an hour, just lifting, moving, placing. From the outside, it's the most boring thing in the world. But when the attention is close, it is the most compelling thing in the world.

So that's one piece—to examine what boredom is telling you, and then to see if you can actually bring the attention in close.

But what if you don't realize you're bored until after half an hour, and only then you realize, "Oh, this is very boring"?

This is an interesting case. I would say that if you don't realize you're bored until after half an hour, you were not bored for that half hour. Maybe the last two minutes you were bored, and then you're projecting it backward. Because if you were bored for that whole half hour, you would know it much earlier.

In some way, you were there doing it, and then it could very well be that after half an hour or so, your energy gets lower. It's not so much boredom as low energy, and then you're interpreting that low energy as, "Oh, this was so boring," instead of recognizing, "No, I was there for that time, and now all of a sudden it's tiresome or burdensome."

Well, that's quite normal. We do have energy swings, ups and downs. It might be at that time—and there are lots of ways to work with energy—but maybe that's the time to get up from the sitting and do some walking, or change the activity, just as a way of raising the energy.

We have to be careful. The mind is very tricky. Meditation really reveals that. We often misinterpret different feelings. And that sounds to me like what's happening—that you're calling perhaps some minutes of low energy "boredom" and then extrapolating it back over all that time.

I'm going to talk more about misinterpreting emotions in the next part.

But really, when you do become aware that you're bored, even if it's earlier than half an hour, really play with that sense of... And this is a great skill in meditation. We actually have the ability to change the quality of our attention. Sometimes our attention is just half-hearted, casual, as I said. So then it gets boring because we're not fully there. But it's possible to actually bring the mind in close. Let me feel this closely. And by doing that, I think you would notice a change.

Why don't we take maybe twenty minutes for another walking exercise. I want to suggest two things in this walking. First, just give emphasis to the practice you did in the sitting. As you're doing the walking, however you're doing it, really keep an eye out for the arising of thoughts. Just notice, and you'll see very clearly in the walking how you'll be walking and then five steps later you realize you haven't been there—you've been lost in some mind-created world.

I have found it really interesting to remind myself at that time that this is not just having been forgetful, that it actually was the creation of a mind-created world. So that concept I get more familiar with, because a good part of our life's experience are simply mind-created worlds and not what's actually happening.

You can see this hugely when you're doing the walking. Pay attention to this aspect. A good many of our mind-created worlds are about past and future. Whatever we're thinking about the past is not happening now. And whatever we're thinking about the future is not happening now, other than as a thought. It's fine to have these thoughts of past and future if we know that we're thinking. But to be lost in them and to not know is simply to be lost in a mind-created world where we're not attentive to where we actually are.

So in this walking period, keep an eye out for that, because they will certainly arise. As well as perhaps the feeling of boredom. "Oh, five minutes. Oh, I have fifteen more minutes to go." See what happens when you, if you feel that, bring the mind in closer to whatever it is you're feeling. The step, the movement, seeing, a sound. There's a lot to discover.

CHAPTER 33

# Compassion and Equanimity in Difficult Times, Daylong Retreat: Morning

Joseph Goldstein · 2h10

> *In this morning session of a daylong retreat with True North Insight, Joseph Goldstein offers a transformative approach to meditation practice drawn from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). Rather than narrowing attention to specific objects like the breath, he introduces the Buddha's instruction to be mindful that 'there is a body' as a spacious framework for awareness. This simple phrase creates an open field in which breathing, sounds, and sensations can arise naturally without the practitioner's interference or control.*
>
> *Goldstein explores how dropping beneath concepts—like 'hand' or 'body'—into direct felt experience reveals the constantly changing nature of sensation. This insight into impermanence (anicca) is the doorway to understanding why attachment causes suffering (dukkha). He emphasizes the critical importance of noticing our conditioned responses to pleasant and unpleasant experiences, teaching practitioners to observe these vedanā (feeling tones) with equanimity rather than grasping or aversion.*
>
> *The teaching includes practical guidance on mindfulness of seeing—a sense field we often overlook while swimming in concepts about what we perceive. Goldstein shares how noting 'seeing' eliminated his habitual judging mind in the retreat dining hall. He also offers a profound reframing of intimacy as a quality of attention rather than requiring another person, suggesting that full presence with any experience creates the oneness we typically seek in relationships. Throughout, the emphasis remains on practical application: these insights can be practiced at any speed, in any activity, simply by remembering 'there is a body.'*

It's good to be with all of you here again. I guess many of you were here last night as well. The idea for today is to have it more of a practice day.

As you know, there are many different styles of meditation and many different nuances of instructions. My own temperament leads me to synthesize the different suggestions and techniques that I've found helpful. So today you'll be getting something of a mishmash—a way of practice. Most of it will be familiar to you.

But I'd like to emphasize today not only the technique or techniques of mindfulness—what it is that we should be paying attention to—but also what we learn from being mindful. Because mindfulness is really just the first step. It's becoming attentive to

what's arising. And as we saw last night, there are many nuances to how we're being attentive. Are we being attentive with openness? Are we being attentive with aversion? Are we being attentive with grasping?

We want to really see and examine, to establish a baseline of mindfulness or awareness with whatever's arising, along with that balance of mind, that openness of mind, that equanimity that's not pushing things away, that's not holding on. And then from that place of balanced awareness, what is it that we're learning? What are we seeing about the nature of our experience? Because that's the wisdom piece. Mindfulness gets us there, and then when we look through being mindful, we begin to see the deeper nature of our experience—of all the things that are arising, how they're arising, at different levels.

During the day I'll point at various times to both classical insights that arise for everybody, but also some things that I have been noticing and practicing in my own meditation over these last years. When I go on retreat, almost always there's some new angle, some new understanding that arises. Maybe it's from just a single line in a text that I might have read many times, but this time it takes on a new meaning and transforms my practice in a certain way. So I'd like to share some of those during the course of the day and see if they're helpful for you as well.

We'll begin as we began last night, taking a comfortable seated posture. One advantage of this kind of seating is that if it's reasonably comfortable for you, you can really relax. You can settle back into a certain ease of posture, at the same time maintaining a certain quality—I call it a quality of dignity. So you're not just slumping over. You're sitting, and you might be quite comfortable and relaxed, but it feels as if the spine is upright and there's a quality of alertness in the mind and in the body.

The phrase I use in describing the practice is to be relaxed but not casual. There's a certain intentionality to how we're sitting.

As a preface to these first instructions: very often meditation instructions in Vipassana, insight meditation, begin with the body and the breath. This is very common because it's very noticeable—a very easy object of experience to connect with. We all have bodies and we can all feel the body, and everybody breathes until they don't. So this is a very basic, fundamental way of establishing mindfulness.

But there are different ways of attending to the breath, and I wanted to mention two of them. You can experiment with both.

As we settle into the body, there is a phrase in the Buddha's discourse on the foundations of mindfulness—in Pali it's called the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This is the fundamental teaching on mindfulness. There's one phrase in it that a few years ago jumped out at me while I was on retreat. I started using it in a different way and it changed how I practiced.

The Buddha says: be mindful—and then, as if it's a direct statement—"there is a body," to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness.

There are two elements in that instruction. One is—and this is what I found so helpful—to actually use the phrase silently in the mind, occasionally: "There is a body. There is a body. There is a body."

And I found it very helpful as a way of simply and very gently reminding the attention: yes, there is a body. Just settle into the body. It's nothing complicated. It's nothing you need fantastic concentration for. It's just that awareness. There is a body.

That phrase provides a frame—the awareness of the body—within which to then be aware of whatever is arising. And this is one of the differences in how we can attend to the breath. Because when we say "there is a body," at a certain point you will be feeling, you'll be noticing, that the body is breathing. That's part of what's happening in the body.

Now generally, classically, the instructions have been to zero in on the breath, to really narrow the attention, to feel very precisely the rising and falling of the abdomen or the in and out at the nose. We can feel this kind of effort to narrow the attention just to the breath. And this is a good way to practice. It really develops a strong and fine one-pointedness in that narrowness of attention.

But I also found it very revealing and helpful at times not to narrow the attention, but to keep the wider frame—there is a body—and then simply, within that frame, be aware that the body is breathing. So there's not a zeroing in on the breath. We're keeping the wider context, but within that, the feeling of the body breathing also becomes clear.

Is this difference clear? I think it would be interesting just for you to experiment and see. Because I had been doing so many years of the narrowing of attention, I found it very helpful and revealing to not narrow the attention, to keep the frame of the whole body, and to do that by repeating the phrase occasionally: there is a body. Not every moment, but periodically—there is a body—and then simply settling in and feeling the body breathing within that.

It may be that you'll find it's both more relaxed and that there is less tendency to influence the breath in some way. Because sometimes when we're zeroing in and narrowing the attention on the breath, unconsciously we may be pulling it a little bit, or pushing it, or influencing how we're breathing in a very subtle way. But if we're using "there is a body," just settling back and allowing the body to breathe, you may find that there's less of that influence and the breath just becomes a natural function of the body sitting here.

So I'd like to have some time for you to experiment with this, so you get a taste of this possibility. And then there are many things that can be discovered once you have some feeling for this particular way of practice.

Are there any questions just about this instruction, not about anything else? Is it clear?

Okay, so we'll sit for about ten or fifteen minutes. I'll occasionally just repeat a few words reminding you.

Sit and begin. Just sit and know you're sitting. Intermittently use the phrase "there is a body" as a way of settling into the feeling of the whole body. And within that frame, but not zeroing in on it, be aware of the body breathing. The body breathes in. The body breathes out.

Within the larger space—there is a body—in addition to feeling the body breathing, you may also be aware of different sounds. The ambient sounds in the room, the sound of my voice. Let them also be simple arisings in that space of awareness, contained in the frame: there is a body. It's all arising effortlessly. The body breathing. Different sounds.

When you notice the mind wandering, getting lost in a thought or an image, as soon as you become aware of the mind wandering, simply notice that and come back to the awareness of the body sitting. There is a body. Re-establishing the connection. There is a body. Feeling the body breathing. Aware of different sounds.

Be mindful there is a body, just to the extent necessary for clear knowing. Be aware of it clearly, to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness. If you can sustain the awareness—there is a body, knowing the body breathing, knowing sounds—clear knowing, continuous mindfulness. Staying very relaxed, but not casual.

As you're sitting with the awareness "there is a body," keeping that open frame in which you may be feeling sensations of the body breathing, hearing sounds—within that frame, there is a body. You may also be feeling other bodily sensations. Maybe they're strong sensations in particular places. Maybe they're simply background sensations.

You can include the awareness of these sensations in this field of openness. There's no need to zero your attention in on any particular sensation. Simply be aware that it is another arising experience within the frame of there being a body.

Sometimes these sensations come into the foreground of attention, and the breath or sounds may recede to the background. Sometimes the other bodily sensations remain in the background, even as you're noticing the body breathing in and out. Simply be with the flow of your experience however it unfolds, including the awareness of different bodily sensations as part of what may be arising within this larger frame.

If at times the mind feels inclined to narrow the attention just on the breath, or on a particular sensation, that is also fine to do. You can narrow the attention on that particular flow of sensation—the breath or other bodily sensations—and be with that for some time. Then again, open the field. You can really learn to be flexible with how you're using your attention.

Before we move on to some of the ways of applying this in the walking meditation, I'm interested if you have any questions about the instructions or your experience in the sitting we've just done.

*Question from participant about the thought "there is a body"*

That's a good thought to have. What is this body? It's going to be revealed as we do the walking. It will become clearer.

*Another participant shares their experience*

I just want to say, having meditated for many years and for long periods of time—and this was just a ten-minute sitting—my awareness was that when you kept saying "there is a body," I felt like, stop. Because I realized the discomfort I have in my own body. It's not necessarily a pain or an ache or anything like that. It's a discomfort of living, at that time, in my body. I just wanted to share that.

One of the things that's revealed in meditation are all the conscious and unconscious attitudes we bring to our experience. We're carrying a lot of conditioning about the body—how we feel about bodies in general, about our own bodies, about being in a body. It's a big, rich arena. And just by this simple exercise of settling into the recognition that there's a body, a lot of this starts to reveal itself.

*The participant responds with humor about still finding old patterns*

But just to say—even though you are seeing some of the same old conditioning come up, it's possible, and it's possible to do this quite quickly, that a shift in your attitude about the conditioning can take place. Instead of "Oh, here I am in the body again and I don't like it"—some variation of that—if that's seen clearly, that attitude itself can be recognized as just a passing thought, one you're not identified with. You're actually freeing yourself from being locked into that conditioning even as it's happening. You see it: "Oh yeah, there's that conditioning. That's all it is."

So there's a lot that will reveal itself.

I liked this one because I always had a problem understanding the very narrow instructions to follow your breath. I never really got anywhere with that. And as I was following this, thoughts would come up and I realized that you go where your thought goes. Like you actually feel like you're there. Your body has sensations based on whatever you're thinking. And then when you say, "there is a body," then you're back in your body. And it's like saying "be here now," and not be in some made-up fantasy land or past or future or something that isn't going to happen. And your body reacts as if it's happening.

Yes. Perfect.

Okay, before we start doing the walking meditation, I just want to do a little exercise which will provide perhaps some kind of framework for different ways of paying attention in walking. This is a very simple exercise and many of you may be familiar with it.

So if you just hold your hands together, very simply. And pretend for a moment that you've never meditated. You didn't know anything about this. And maybe you even think it's a little weird. And then I or somebody comes up to you—again, you've never meditated—and asks, what are you feeling? I think for the non-meditator, the most normal response would be, "I feel my hands," or "I feel my hands touching." Would you agree? That's kind of a normal response. But for meditators, it's a whole different story.

So what do you feel? What do some of you feel?

Burning in the index. Pulse. Harmonious energy. Tingling. Numbness. Pressure.

All kinds of sensations, right? When you're on the level of feeling sensations—of pressure, of tingling, of pulse, of all the things you described—and you're simply feeling those sensations, what has happened to the notion of hand? The notion of hand has disappeared, right? And what we're really feeling are just those changing sensations.

So this in itself, even though it seems very simple, is a very significant meditative move. Because the notion of hand is a concept. In other words, it's a concept that comes from a combination of what we see—the form of it—and the sensations that we're feeling. But we put it all together and create a sense of "oh, there's a hand," which is a mental construct. But when we're actually in the felt experience of what's going on, we see that hand disappears, and it's just these changing sensations.

Why is this of any interest? The reason this is a doorway to really deeper meditative insight is that when we're on the level of concept—hand—the concept doesn't change. I have a hand today, a hand yesterday, a hand tomorrow. And because the concept doesn't change, we live in the often unconscious assumption that the hand is something substantial in itself that's basically unchanging, or not changing very much. It is a hand. And yet when we're on the level of direct experience of the sensations, we see that the sensations are changing. They're changing moment to moment. We begin to see that on that level, there's nothing substantial called hand. That's a concept that we've created.

And the concept suggests to us permanence. Whereas on the level of sensation and direct experience, we've dropped beneath the level of concept into what we're actually feeling. And that's when we're entering into the direct experience of this body, this whole body, as a flow of changing energy, changing sensation. Because the hand is just one representation of the experience of the whole body. Do you follow?

So instead of feeling this body is something solid and stable and basically unchanging—even though it changes, we know it changes over time and ages—but not on a moment-to-moment level. And so because we're not seeing that moment-to-moment change of the energy system of the body, it's much, much easier to become attached to it. This is the body. It's pretty solid. Not only that, it's *my* body. And so we create a whole sense of I and mine, because we haven't dropped to the level of just seeing our experience of the body being one of a flow of changing sensations.

So is this clear so far? This is very important, and this understanding can go very deep. The more we enter into the level beneath concepts, the more we explore the truth of the changing, ever-changing, rapidly changing nature—not only of the body, but of all experience. And so that really begins to change our relationship to our lives.

We'll be saying much more about this, but I just wanted to point out the significance of this very simple shift.

So in the walking, what I found—going back to the phrase "there is a body"—it's a little bit ironic in a way, because you would think using the phrase "there is a body" would lead you to the same understanding as "there is a hand." Because body itself is a concept. However, my experience has been, and also working with lots and lots of meditators, using that phrase "there is a body"—it's not meant as a kind of metaphysical statement, that there is a body, that there is a substantial body. That's not the point of the phrase. The point of the phrase is simply to settle into that larger framework in which we can experience the changing flow, the changing nature of the sensations, the flow of sensations of the breath or of different sounds.

So now we'll take some time for walking. You can find someplace in the building or outside—maybe take twenty minutes or so to do some walking exercise. Basically find someplace where you can walk back and forth, but it can be a longer distance. You don't have to necessarily be in just a short space; whatever is comfortable for you.

And I'd like you to notice these different levels of perception. So one level of perception is that yes, there are feet and legs and a body, and I'm walking. So just the normal, conventional perception of what we're doing. Just become aware of that. And see if you can even become aware that somewhere in the mind there is an image or a form of the foot or leg. It may not be very conscious, but it's there. We have some sense of, yeah, there's a foot, there's a leg—just like normal people would say "there is a hand." So be normal people for a while.

But then switch, and go from normal to meditative. And here's where it gets interesting, using the phrase "there is a body" when walking. And this is—you can be walking at, you know, it doesn't have to be at a super slow speed, just even walking at a normal speed or slightly slower than normal. Drop the phrase in and use the phrase "there is a body" as you're walking. And pay attention to what you're experiencing as you use that phrase.

So it's very similar to what you did in the sitting. "There is a body." But then you use that as a frame—oh yeah, the body is breathing and feeling those sensations. There are other sensations happening, there are sounds. The same thing in the walking. "There is a body"—it's just creating the frame. So then you're walking and just be aware of what you're experiencing within that frame.

And what I think you may find, and this is where it's just interesting, even though we're using the phrase "there is a body" to get us there, we begin to experience, on the experience level, there actually isn't a body. All we're experiencing—the way I describe it—we're basically experiencing sensations in space. When we're on the level of actual sensations, not the form or the image of foot or leg.

So we're walking, "there is a body," just create the frame and then just see what you're experiencing. And you may experience that the body disappears. And the experience is just different sensations arising and passing in space, along with sounds, and anything else that may be arising. Again, if at times it feels like your mind wants to narrow the attention, that's fine to do.

You could drop into just the sensations of the foot or leg moving, where you're not holding the bigger frame, or just as if you were feeling the arm moving, really very carefully feeling the sensations of movement. So it's very possible and fine to sometimes narrow the focus, but I'd like you to experiment somewhat with keeping the larger frame in which you're simply allowing whatever sensations to be there.

Does this seem clear? Are there any questions about this instruction for the walking?

This particular use of the phrase "there is a body" in walking meditation really transformed my practice, because for thirty-five years I had been narrowly focusing, which brought its own benefit—it brought it to a great depth. But this opened up a whole different way of understanding.

*

Be mindful there is a body to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness.

I'd like to make a few comments about that walking practice and then have another short sitting, and then we'll open it for some questions about your experience.

One of the things I noticed when I was doing some of the walking practice myself—something I didn't mention—was that because there were quite a lot of people walking and having to navigate among so many people, one aspect of experience that we usually don't bring attention to very mindfully is that of seeing.

Usually we just buy into the conventional reality of what's being seen. We're living in the world of what's being seen, and our minds can get caught up in a lot of judgments and comments about what's being seen. But actually, in this walking practice and in general, it is possible to be doing that walking and simply including seeing as part of

what's arising in the bigger frame. It's not like we're walking, there is a body, we're feeling the points of sensation of the body as moving, and then what's being seen is something different from that. The seeing itself can become simply part of what we're aware of.

I had a very striking example of the importance of this. For most of us who enjoy reasonably good sight, seeing is probably the predominant sense field that we live in, and probably the one we notice mindfully the least. Sounds have a strong impact, so we usually become aware when we're hearing a strong sound. We certainly are more aware of the body. But it's like we're swimming in the world of what's being seen without really being mindful that we're seeing. We're just living in the whole world of concepts that we create about what's being seen.

One example of this happened to me on retreat, illustrating the importance of bringing mindfulness to seeing. I was on retreat at IMS, the Insight Meditation Society, with a lot of meditators—ninety-five, a hundred meditators. I noticed that every time I went into the dining room for meals, my mind would have a comment about almost everybody. It was ridiculous. I liked what they were wearing. I didn't like what they were wearing. They were moving too quickly. They were moving too slowly. They took too much food. They didn't take enough food. It was just this endless litany of comment.

After a while, when I finally noticed that, I said, "This is ridiculous." Then I began to see: why? Why are there all these commenting and judging thoughts in the mind? And I realized that they were all coming because I was not being mindful of seeing.

So what I started to do on that retreat—and since then, whenever I go on retreat into the dining room or where there are a lot of people around—for some time as a practice exercise, all I will do is note "seeing." That's all I'm paying attention to, that sense field. I'll go through the whole lunch line, getting the food, sitting at the table: seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing, reminding myself, "Yes, I'm seeing."

It was amazing. About ninety-eight percent of all the comments and judgments were eliminated, because I was being mindful of what I was seeing instead of having the mind jump out through the eye door, land on what was being seen, and then create all kinds of judgments and comments. Do you follow this? It was so simple and so freeing of a pattern that had been quite well established, all that commenting and judging mind. And it was all simply because I was not mindful that I was seeing.

I would suggest—not only in the context of a mini retreat like this, but out in the world—to really bring that aspect of mindfulness to your life. As I say, we live mostly in the world of what's being seen. That is the predominant field for most of us. And yet we

are totally caught, unmindfully, in that world, creating whole worlds of concepts about what's being seen and then living in that, living in that reactivity. This is not to say that we don't respond to what's being seen, but we can be doing it mindfully.

So when I was in India—this goes back many years, when I was first practicing there in Bodhgaya—in the town there was a working elephant. And sometimes I'd be walking into the village and the elephant would be coming the other way. I didn't simply say, "Seeing, seeing, seeing." I stepped out of the way. It's a big contest between an elephant and Joseph.

So it doesn't mean that we don't respond to what's being seen. But we're doing it with awareness, we're doing it with mindfulness, with wisdom, with discernment. We're responding appropriately rather than having this endless litany of judgments and comments and reactions and all of that mental activity that goes on a good part of the time because we're not mindful of what we're seeing.

So that was one piece that I noticed could well be brought into this walking exercise here. We'll just include that.

The other comment I wanted to make about the walking was that in terms of the particular suggestion I was making—in terms of "there is a body," using that as the frame and seeing what your experience is—I realized there were certain constraints because of where we are now. But keep in mind that you can do that at any time, at any speed. You're just living your life. You're walking down the street. You don't have to be in any particular meditative stylistic form. You're just walking. But if you remember, if you're mindful, you're just walking. Oh, there's a body. Even in that very normal way of activity, just that settling back into that frame will reveal that all that you're really experiencing are these different sensations in space, and perhaps sights and sounds. And the solidity, the sense of the solidity of the body and "this body is me"—that really begins to fall away. But I wanted to emphasize that this can be done in very normal circumstances. You don't have to be walking slowly or in any special way. It's just remembering.

So the first really important meditative shift is what I described earlier: when we go from the concept of things, like "hand," to the actual felt sensations. Because on that level we're experiencing, in many ways, the first direct, immediate, vivid experience of the impermanence of it all. The sensations are changing all the time. It's like a current, a river of changing sensations, which we call "hand." But we want to drop into that direct perception of impermanence.

The next big meditative understanding, which I mentioned last night, has tremendous implications in our lives. It's one of the very key elements: the very deeply conditioned habit we have of liking what's pleasant and not liking what's unpleasant. You can substitute liking and not liking with clinging to and avoiding, grasping and aversion. We're going for the pleasant, we're trying to avoid or keep away the unpleasant. And this is normal. This is the normal way we're living our lives.

So it's not that if you notice yourself doing this, there should be all this self-judgment. "Oh, there I go, hating the unpleasant again"—which is just more hating the unpleasant. No, this is our normal conditioning, so this is quite natural. However, it's problematic because we cannot control the flow. We can influence it to some extent, and we do try to influence it, but we can't really control the arising of pleasant and unpleasant things. Can you say, as you're sitting in your life, "Let me only experience pleasant sensations. Let me only experience pleasant emotions, pleasant thoughts"? No. Things are coming out of causes and conditions which are very complex, multifaceted, and our life is made up of pleasant experiences and unpleasant experiences. That's true for everyone.

The reason for giving emphasis to this is that if we're attached, really holding on in some kind of unhealthy way, some obsessive way, attached to the pleasant, then we're going to suffer when it inevitably changes. And it will. If we're attached to youth, we're not going to feel so great as we get older. Or even—and this is maybe a little counterintuitive—but if we're attached in an unhealthy way to health, then how is our mind going to be when the body is not healthy? And that's going to happen at one point or another.

So the attachment to the pleasant, as I said last night about some other things, does not enhance the pleasure. In fact, it detracts from it. I'm not suggesting we should pull away from the pleasant. Pleasant is nice. Pleasant is pleasant. But it is impermanent. It's not going to last.

Our conditioning leads us to want the pleasant and reject the unpleasant. This is the cause of stress in our lives, the suffering in our lives. Or we try to build a defensive wall against everything unpleasant, thinking we'll live in a certain way and keep everything difficult away. It just doesn't work. And that very act of living in that way creates its own tension. We're not living freely.

Meditation is a way of understanding this fundamental principle of life—that our life consists of pleasant and unpleasant in all the realms. Pleasant and unpleasant physical sensations, pleasant and unpleasant sounds, thoughts, emotions, tastes, everything.

That's why this particular matrix of pleasant and unpleasant is so critical, because it's pervasive and touches every single aspect of our experience. It's either pleasant or unpleasant, and sometimes it's called neutral if it's neither.

In our practice, what we need to do is slowly decondition our more normal response of pleasant leading to "I like, I want," and unpleasant leading to "push away, I don't like, let's get rid of." That's our normal response. Meditation is a way of deconditioning that.

So when pleasant comes—whatever it is, pleasant bodily sensation, pleasant thoughts, pleasant fantasies—we acknowledge it, we're being mindful, we can even be noting, "Oh pleasant, this is pleasant." We feel it. We're not pushing it away, we're feeling the pleasantness, but without attachment, without grasping, knowing that it is a changing feeling. Pleasant—it's nice when it's there, and it's going to go.

When unpleasant feeling comes, instead of that moment of panic about pain of whatever sort, we decondition that response. It's like I was saying with fear. It's okay. It's okay to feel unpleasant. It's okay to feel the unpleasantness of physical pain. So instead of aversion or fear or pulling back from it, we coach ourselves. We need to coach ourselves because our conditioning is the opposite. We remind ourselves, "Okay, there's a painful feeling here. It's okay. Just let me feel it. Let me relax into it."

And we see that the ability to relax into it itself eases the mind tremendously, because we're not in that tight, contracted, reactive state. It's okay. The unpleasant doesn't become pleasant all of a sudden—it may still be painful. And it's okay to feel it.

This is a huge reordering of our inner life, our inner conditioning. It has tremendous implications for how freely we live our lives as conditions keep changing for us. Whatever the conditions of our bodies, our relationships, our emotions, our work, the politics in the world—this pleasant and unpleasant is happening on every single level. How we relate to that will determine our own level of peace and happiness and ease.

There is a way of practicing this very specifically in meditation. We settle in—there is a body, feeling the breath. For the most part, for most people, although not always, feeling the body breathing is pretty neutral. It's not particularly pleasant, not unpleasant. So that's a neutral experience. But as you're sitting in that very open space, aware of the body breathing, aware of sounds, you may well become aware of different other bodily sensations. I would suggest that you particularly notice as these other sensations arise whether you're experiencing them as pleasant or unpleasant or possibly neutral. It doesn't have to be intense, although maybe there will be some intense sensation. Maybe it's subtle—perhaps a feeling of tension or tightness or pressure. They may have even a slight flavor. You're feeling it as being unpleasant.

So notice that. Oh, unpleasant, unpleasant. And then notice your response to that. Are you relaxed in that awareness? Are you just settled back, acknowledging, oh, unpleasant, unpleasant, but the mind is even, not reactive? Or are you noticing unpleasant, painful, I don't like? See if that's the reaction. And then notice what the effect in the body and in the mind is of "I don't like." Really notice what happens from that.

And the same thing if you're experiencing some pleasant sensation. Maybe there's a nice light vibration, or a softness, or a tingling. A lot of pleasant sensations can arise. If you become aware and notice that, make a note: oh, this is pleasant, pleasant. And can you be in that same openness of just feeling it, being with it, but without wanting it to continue? I've noticed this so many times in my practice—when I've had some really nice pleasant sensation, then in the back or front of my mind: okay, how can I keep this going? That's just a kind of greed or grasping. And they always go anyway.

There's more to say about this, which I'll talk about this afternoon, which actually leads to even more profound understandings. But for now, let's focus on just the awareness of what's pleasant, what's unpleasant, making a note to highlight it, and then noticing whatever reaction or non-reaction there is in the mind about it.

Does the instruction seem clear? Okay, so we'll sit for about fifteen minutes. I'll probably speak a little less during this sitting since you are now all experienced meditators.

*

There's some time now if you have any questions about anything you experienced this morning or the instructions.

*Question: I have a question about the notion of the reality of the hand versus the reality of the sensations in the hand. I feel, why not turn it exactly the other way around and say the hand is undeniably real while the sensations are transitory? And then I think, well, why is there a hierarchy at all? Isn't that also imposing an abstract notion on all of it? Where do you go with that?*

Well, I think that within the question, you opened the doorway to the answer. I'm going to just drop down to the quintessential statement of the Buddha in terms of what he taught. Underneath all of the philosophy and the descriptions and everything, he said he really just teaches one thing: he teaches suffering and the end of suffering. That's the point of it all.

So then the question is, well, what is the cause of suffering in our lives? If we want to come to the end of it, we need to understand the cause, and of course this is the classical formulation of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its cause, its end, and the way to the end.

One particular way of understanding the cause of suffering in our lives is that when we are attached or hold on to that which in its very nature will change, we suffer. I mean, it's obvious if we're holding on—you know, if you're holding on to a rope and the rope is being pulled through your hand, the more tightly you hold on, the more rope burn you get, right? So one aspect of the practice is just to see on all levels that things are in constant change.

Even the hand as a concept—we may not be seeing a change moment to moment as we are in seeing the sensations, but certainly over years we can see the change in the hand. And certainly when the body dies, it's going to change. So the point of the meditation, in many different ways—and there are many different techniques and methods for doing it—is to keep drawing the mind down to the insight into impermanence on deeper and deeper levels, because it's that insight that deconditions grasping. And the less grasping, the less suffering. So that's the trajectory of it all and the point of it all, rather than some philosophical postulation.

*It's a practical thought then. Thank you.*

*Question: Joseph, over time I'm reading a book called On Tyranny, 20 Lessons for Difficult Times. The author talks about making eye contact. What happens to me more and more is I say bonjour to someone or hello, and they answer me and they don't look at me. You talked about seeing. Could you comment on that, please?*

Well, it somewhat depends—some combination of different conditions—of why people might not be making eye contact.

And there's a whole range of possibilities, so it would be very hard to say specifically what's happening in any one situation.

Just a few examples. When people are in retreat, very often we suggest avoiding eye contact just to help people stay within their inner frame of reference—although now we're including more awareness of seeing, but not so much eye contact with people. But that's for a very specific purpose.

Out in the world, people might be avoiding eye contact for many reasons. Maybe they're just lost in their own world, their own particular mind drama that's going on at the time. Maybe there's fear—some people simply don't want to connect; there's a certain fearfulness of connecting. Maybe somebody's just in a grumpy mood and they don't want eye contact.

But I think from your perspective, or our perspective, if the motive is one of goodwill, it's worth continuing to exude that goodwill. People respond how they respond.

There's one monk, a Sri Lankan monk named Bhante Gunaratana—those of you who know him, he's now in his eighties, a wonderful monk. He goes on a five-mile walk every day, wherever he is, walking along the road. And he's in monk's robes. And every car that passes, he waves. It's so wonderful. Sometimes he's in Barre, which is this small, rural town, and he's walking along the road. I'm partly projecting with my own imagination, but sometimes you can get a sense of the responses. A lot of people just wave back. And a lot of people are looking at him like he's a little odd. There are all kinds of responses to it. But he goes on waving.

*Question from the audience about using labels in the practice of mindfulness of seeing.*

I think labels can be very helpful, but particularly labeling "seeing" rather than what's being seen. The label itself is not what's important—what's important is being mindful. So the label is just like a coach or a reminder: "Oh yes, this is seeing."

I found it really helpful in the situation I described earlier, because it was so easy, and the mind was so conditioned, to again be pulled out into what was being seen—landing out there and then having all kinds of judgments. So the labeling, the noting, really helped me stay back. And the seeing became receptive rather than the mind going out. It was just receiving the sight.

There's a whole story—maybe I'll try to abbreviate it—that illustrates the power of playing with this.

Many of you are probably familiar with the artist Kandinsky, who was supposedly the first artist to really paint in a purely abstract way. There's a story of his going to an exhibition of Monet in St. Petersburg—the series of paintings called Monet's Haystacks, where Monet painted haystacks at different times of day and through different times of the year.

Kandinsky, in seeing this exhibition, had a transformative revelation. As he was looking so intently at the haystacks, he began to see that what was really there was just color and form and brushstrokes. There was no haystack—nothing that we would ascribe conventional reality to. It was all just made up of colors and forms.

There's an article describing this. It's as if he fell into a whole new universe of color and form and light and shadow, free of concepts. And of course, that then informed his painting and the whole movement in art—this new way of seeing. It came about from seeing rather than getting caught in the conceptual overlay of what's being seen.

So I think it's a powerful practice. But again, when the elephant is walking toward you, you don't want to just see color and form.

It's something that I have more fun and appreciate more and more. And when I'm alone at home, things are going great.

One practitioner shared: "I'm saying meditation is highly appreciated, and I find it great when I'm alone at home or here with people meditating. My challenge comes in staying an observer or staying mindful in relationship. Particularly I appreciate the comment from the person who spoke before me—when my three children come at me and start talking, my partner and everything, being the observer and talking at the same time... the mind becomes really overwhelmed and just cannot stay mindful because there's too much coming in. So it's a question of how to stay present in speed, how to be present when the external source becomes overwhelming. Whatever experience is going on internally is not so bad. But when it's coming from the outside, I'm still wondering: what do I do with that? It's challenging."

When I was a kid, really young, I lived up in the country with very few people. Sometimes we'd visit relatives in the city, and near where they lived there was a busy road. For some reason—maybe all kids like to do this—I just liked to stand by the side of the road watching the cars go by. There weren't that many cars where I lived, so this was my great entertainment.

But I learned something, even as a kid. There are two ways of watching speeding cars go by. At first, what I was doing gave me a headache—trying to track each one. Another way was just keeping really perfectly still and letting the cars cross my field of vision. I could stay still and the cars were going by just as fast, but I didn't have to do anything to be aware of them all. They were doing the work.

There is some analogy here. Even when a lot's going on, the tendency is to try covering all the bases, taking care of everything at once. It would be an interesting experiment—and it would take practice and exploring—to see what it would be like to find

that center space and then deal with each thing that comes up as it's coming up, rather than looking ahead or looking behind and trying to cover it all at once. Because that's when the mind can really get agitated and feel overwhelmed. But moment to moment—oh, screaming... making a mess... whatever the various activities are.

And in all that, essential in that situation and in all of our life's situations, is to really be monitoring and attending to your own inner response and reactivity as things are going on. If you're noticing that the mind, the heart is getting wound up in some way, then it might be time to consciously impose a pause—"Okay kids, one minute break"—or whatever, however you can figure out how to do that. Just realize: I need a few breaths here. Because otherwise we get caught up in the momentum of our reactivity, and it starts to spiral out of control.

For me, one of the joys of meditation is to see it not only as a particular technique—of which there are many—but more to appreciate the creative aspect of it. There's a situation in my mind, in my experience. What's the cause of the suffering or the stress here? Where's the place to unhook from that? We bring an investigative mind to our particular situation, and that's what makes it interesting. We find our own ways. Once we know the principle—okay, I need to unhook from this reactivity—we can explore.

One of my meditative mantras is: whatever works. When we're caught up in something or other, it's like, okay, whatever works.

Another practitioner offered: "I wanted to begin by expressing my appreciation for the very deep and profound simplicity with which you are sharing these teachings. I'm circling around something that I'm not really clear about, so I'm hoping that your discernment will get to the heart of it. I was very struck last night when you talked about the almost aesthetic quality of sadness and that poignancy. And that's related to what I'm circling around. I'm wondering about how passion connects with what you're talking about—and eros, I don't mean just sexually, but the deep intensity with which we can live in life—and how that connects with the non-attachment that you're talking about."

Perfect.

I was hoping somebody would ask that question. Thank you. And the answer really may not answer your question, but it's a chance for me to say something I've been wanting to share. I learned this approach from my teacher, Munindraji. People would ask him all kinds of questions, and then he'd answer whatever he wanted to answer. It was a great teaching tool.

I was talking to Pascal yesterday, and we may do this as a joint book. It's basically a two-paragraph book—maybe even one paragraph. And the title of the book is *The Myth of Intimacy*. You could substitute "passion" for that, or whatever word you like. So what is this two-paragraph book on the myth of intimacy?

It's basically one sentence. Our common conventional understanding is that intimacy requires two. And so much of our lives we're searching for that person we can be intimate with. One of the great discoveries in meditation is that the quality of intimacy is not dependent on anybody else or any particular experience. The quality of intimacy has to do with the quality of our attention. We can become intimate—even to that sense of becoming one with, which would be the height of intimacy—in any moment of experience when we are fully attentive to whatever's arising.

Very often, and this is a common experience in meditation, once people deepen their practice to some extent, the reason they find it so rewarding is that the experience sitting on your cushion or walking becomes exceedingly intimate. It's like there is no separation of oneself from the experience. There's a oneness with the experience. And I have found that this understanding of intimacy really carries over to relationships with other people—taking it out of all our concepts of what an intimate relationship is, but reframing it more as: what's the quality of attention in any interaction?

One of the things I really love about teaching on retreats, or even in this situation responding to questions, is that it's a very intimate space. If there's a genuine kind of openness to what's being expressed and experienced, something quite profound happens. I often call the meditation interviews "ten-minute marriages" because they're very intimate. I kind of recommend the ten-minute marriage.

"So if I may, I'd just like to notice—I noticed that rather than speak about passion, you spoke about intimacy, and I get it."

Yes, good.

*

"For me, my question was more coming back to the walking meditation. I noticed that I had a really strong wanting to close my eyes all the time. I've noticed I've been meditating always with eyes closed while sitting, and I've also noticed in my yoga practice I have a tendency to close my eyes all the time. It feels like I can connect more with the sensations of the body that way. But then as I was walking, it's not as functional to close your eyes. And I was seeing the periphery of my body, so I had a hard time experi-

encing it as body sensation because I could see the form of my body. That's why I had the tendency of closing my eyes. So I'm asking myself: is the sitting meditation and the yoga practice now creating a problem because now I'm walking?"

Well, it could be creating an artificial limitation—not that there's anything wrong with that. I've mostly sat with my eyes closed as well, although in walking I generally keep my eyes open. But the depth of practice and what you can understand is not dependent on your eyes being closed. Keeping them closed does cut out certain fields of perception so that you can perhaps experience more vividly the subtle sensations in the body. There is something that happens from that.

But I have done practices where one sits with eyes open, and practices with eyes closed. At first sitting with eyes open felt a little less deep, less vivid. But after just some practice with it, I realized that it's the same. You can come to the same level of stillness, of openness, of connectedness. So you might just experiment. Take a week or two where you're doing your same practice, whatever practice you're doing, but just do it with your eyes slightly open and see what that's like. I think you'll find after a while that it really doesn't make any difference. And it does open the possibility of being equally aware in more normal circumstances when our eyes need to be open—not losing ourselves in what's being seen, because we've practiced being aware of that sense field.

*

"My question has to do with the presentation you gave yesterday on how life's experiences—grief, sadness, death, sickness—you advised equanimity as opposed to indifference. I was comparing that to other traditions such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which says, and I'm paraphrasing, that there are some things you can change, some things you can't, and you need to distinguish between the two and accept what you cannot change. The tension I'm seeing with what you presented is that there are some things within your sphere of influence. So are you suggesting not trying to change them?"

No, not at all.

I think there's no difference, actually, in the teachings. And I think I've mentioned, but perhaps passed over it quite quickly, that equanimity is just that place of clear seeing, impartiality—"Oh, this is how it is."

From that basis of clear seeing, then exactly what you're saying, there can be the discernment: first, is this skillful or is it unskillful? Is this causing suffering or not causing suffering? So we can make that assessment. Then there's a further assessment: is this something I can change or influence, or not?

If it is something we can change, that's when the whole movement of compassionate response comes. Compassion for oneself, compassion for others—that's what motivates us to change. If it's something that we see is unskillful, maybe out in the world, and cannot be changed, we still see that clearly, and we can still feel the compassion, but have the equanimity of realizing this is beyond my control. So it feels to me like it's the same teaching.

Now, you're going to be faced with one incredibly difficult challenge, and that is to stay even remotely mindful during the lunch break. I think it would be particularly helpful to work with this larger frame we've been talking about: there is a body. Just having that in the background, because that can be held in any activity, at any speed. You don't have to be super slow and meticulous in what you're doing, which is appropriate in some meditative situations. But in this kind of situation, where you'll probably be out and about, maybe going for a walk and eating, just see if you can hold or come back to: "Oh, there is a body." And then simply being aware of whatever your experience is within that.

This includes everything—all the sensations that you may feel, the sights, the sounds, the tastes. Remember the instruction from the Sutta that the Buddha gave. It's very simple and very direct: be mindful "there is a body."

We're just using that phrase, just to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness. There's nothing we have to struggle with, we don't have to be super effortful. It's just enough—"there is a body"—just enough for clear knowing of what's arising, and as much continuity in that as possible. And when we forget, we come back.

Have a nice lunch.

CHAPTER 34

# Questions and Answers

Joseph Goldstein · 1h09

> *In this Q&A session from a three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein offers nuanced guidance on several key aspects of Buddhist practice. He explores the different meanings of intention (cetanā)—from the moment-to-moment energetic impulse that initiates action to the broader sense of motivation and aspiration—emphasizing how easily we become identified with the continuous flow of intention, creating a false sense of self.*
>
> *Goldstein discusses the progress of insight maps with characteristic pragmatism, noting that while some practitioners describe their experience in classical terms, others simply report deepening levels of letting go. He cautions against over-reliance on these maps, sharing how his early study led to misinterpretation of experience. The conversation turns to doubt (vicikicchā) as a particularly dangerous hindrance because it masquerades as wisdom, pulling us completely out of present-moment awareness. His practical remedy is elegantly simple: return to direct experience where doubt cannot exist.*
>
> *Perhaps most profound is his exploration of craving for becoming (bhava-taṇhā)—that subtle leaning into experience, the "in-order-to mind" that pervades practice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, Goldstein describes how deeply contemplating this truth dissolves the wanting mind, offering genuine tastes of peace. He concludes with compassionate guidance on working with fear, introducing the transformative mantra "it's okay" and the image of caring for a frightened child as a model for self-compassion.*

Nice to be with you all.

So there's a certain ground rule for this evening: just easy questions. I'm out of practice.

The question is about intention and the three levels and all types of intention—how do they work together?

I haven't really used that particular framework very much, but as I understand at least part of the question, I think one of the problems or the challenges is that the word intention in English can refer to different things. We use the same word for quite different meanings.

For example, the intention on a moment-to-moment level—like intention to move or intention to stand or intention to walk—that's almost like an energetic impulse to initiate an action. You can feel it kind of about to do something and then the doing of it. It's like a spark plug or something; it initiates the action.

But we also use the word intention in a more overarching way. We could think of it either as the motivation to do something or the goal. We have an intention to accomplish something. So it's intention as a goal or intention as a motivation. These are quite different things, and I think we just want to be aware of each of them as they arise.

One of the interesting things about intention as the energetic impulse is something I found to be very interesting in my own practice. In walking meditation, or just walking about, intention has to be continually arising. Because if you're taking a step and the intention stops in the middle of the step, the movement will stop. The intention is what's keeping the movement going.

The example is given—this wasn't from the Buddhist time—but it's like plugging an electric appliance into an outlet. If you take the plug out, whatever the appliance is stops working. It needs the constant flow of electricity. In the same way, there needs to be a constant flow of intention to keep an activity going.

One time I was on self-retreat, and I was doing walking practice—not the super slow walking, I was just stepping, stepping, stepping. I became interested in noticing the ongoing flow of intention, realizing that that's what was needed to keep the movement happening.

As I focused in on that quality of the flow of intention, first I began to feel the expression of it in a particular place in my body, even though it's a mental factor. Many mental qualities find expression in some kind of bodily sensation. I began to notice some aspect of the intention sort of in the area of the heart, and it almost felt like a little intention motor, which just kept me walking.

First, just that investigation was interesting, but what really became illuminating in that little experiment was realizing how easy it is to unknowingly or unconsciously be identified with intention. The sense of self is easily created when we're identified with this flow of intentions that keeps activity going on, and that gives rise to the sense, "Well, I'm walking," or "I'm doing this," or "I'm doing that."

As I became mindful of that intention motor, it really highlighted the impersonal, non-self nature of intention. It felt like that was just one little piece of disentangling the sense of self in the midst of our ordinary activities—to see the impersonality of it. That was interesting, and you might want to just experiment with that.

As you know, the Buddha gave a lot of importance to the recognition and the understanding of intention. So that's on this moment-to-moment level—what's like the electric current that keeps everything going.

Of course, it must be obvious to you by now that intention in the meaning of motivation or aspiration—the intention in doing something, the motivation in doing something—it's hugely important to be aware of that and to see whether the motivation is wholesome or unwholesome. Because there are a lot of consequences depending on which it is.

That takes a lot of sensitivity. And it takes a lot of honesty. Maybe you don't fall into this category, but I think very often, or it's not uncommon, to think that our motivations are basically good, and we assume that. They're probably mostly good, but they're probably not always good.

And so it takes a real willingness and honesty just to really take a look at, okay, well, what is the motivation? As you're going through the food line, for example. How much does one take, and is it for just the health of the body, or does some desire and greed come up in the mind with certain foods?

A very good place to observe this—and I'm jumping ahead about a week now because it's not so much while you're on retreat but when you'll be coming out of retreat—an amazingly fruitful place to watch this kind of intention as motivation is in speech. Huge. If we could really be aware of our motive before we speak, we'd probably speak a lot less.

So these are some of the thoughts I have.

*Question: My question relates to the progress of insight. I'm interested in how you hold that and whether you found it to be a useful description of how insight unfolds and happens.*

Yes, so the question was about the map of progress, the progress of insight and the various stages of insight that one goes through, and whether I feel that this is a useful map, whether it's good for meditators to know about this.

In my experience—in fact we were just talking about it at lunch today—it seems that for some meditators, whether they know about it or not, as they're practicing and coming in to describe their practice, they'll describe it pretty classically. They'll just be describing the different stages of insight as the practice deepens. Other people, it's not how they describe their practice, but there can still be the same sense of deepening.

My experience has been that some fall into that classical progressive insight unfolding, while others will be describing their practice and the deepening of it more in terms of just increasing levels of letting go of clinging. And so that's how it'll be described as they come into practice. One can both see it in oneself, and a teacher can really observe how people are just letting go and letting go and letting go. Over all these years of teaching, I've really seen basically those two main streams of how people describe their practice. So I think it's helpful to understand that it is a map, but it's not the only map.

I think it's mostly not useful to know beforehand. Just as an example, I had the misfortune of having read all about it before I started my practice. And even within the first few weeks or months of my practice in India, I was thinking, "Oh yeah, I'm here, oh yeah, now I'm at this stage and this stage and this stage"—because I wasn't at any of the stages. Those concepts were so in my mind and I was so locked into that map that I was really misinterpreting a lot of my experience. It can set up a lot of expectation.

Of course, if one already does know the map, you can't really unknow it. But I would be watchful of how much interpreting of one's experience happens in terms of that as you're going along. During my practice, I had one particular mental note: "practice assessment tape." I would just see my mind judging, assessing my own practice. I'd have lots of judgments, both good and bad, assessing the practice. When we're caught in that, we're not really practicing. We're just caught up in our interpretation of what's happening. And it was not helpful.

Also, sometimes even for experienced teachers and people who are immersed in that system, it's often difficult to tell which stage one is at because certain qualities overlap. For example, there are certain qualities at the stage of things arising and passing away with very strong mindfulness and equanimity—it's really a good time in practice, very powerful. But some of those same qualities are also found in the later stages of equanimity, and it's easy to misinterpret.

One of the things Sayadaw U Pandita would say is that if one does know the map and is trying to assess, or for a teacher trying to get a sense of where somebody's at, and there's some doubt about whether it's a higher or lower stage—always assume it's the lower. I think that was good advice.

I think that map is most useful in retrospect, after one has really been immersed in practice for however long—six weeks or three months or five years—and then looking back at various experiences. In looking back, it might give you a sense of where one is in the practice. But it's delicate. I've seen a lot of people get really tied up in knots about what stage and this and that.

*Question about doubt, particularly the form of wavering, and when it gets mingled up with worry and comes to decision making. There's a way in which choices can present themselves as this kind of moral dilemma—wanting to do the right thing, make the right choice. And even on retreat, all throughout the day there are many little choices that have to be made. Sometimes the mind can kind of blow them up and turn them into these big dramatic moral dilemmas.*

So the question is about doubt and being caught in indecision when certain choices come up, sometimes in the context of a moral dilemma of trying to suss out which is the wholesome or which is the unwholesome, and how the mind can get really obsessed about that.

So there are a couple of things with regard to this.

One, if there's the doubt of just the mind feeling confused—"What is going on?"—and there's just not a lot of clarity, or there's doubt like "Am I doing the practice right?"—that kind of doubt is actually very simple to remedy. Because just now, if you feel your hands touching one another, is there any doubt in the mind about the awareness of that sensation? No. Just the awareness of a breath. If we're simply feeling an in-breath or a rising movement and the mind is totally with the moment's experience, there's no doubt. It's very clear.

The doubt starts coming when we lose contact with the moment's experience and the mind spins out in thinking. So when that's happening, if you can recognize it and then just come back to the simplicity of touching, breathing—just coming back right to the simplicity of the moment's experience—the doubt is no longer there. That's relatively simple, although sometimes it's hard to remember to do that because doubt is so seductive.

I don't know whether in the dharma talks anybody mentioned that the reason doubt is so seductive is because it comes masquerading as wisdom. The tone of voice in the mind of the doubting mind sounds very wise: "Well, what should I be doing? Should I be doing this? Should I be doing that? Which is better?" Whatever form our own doubts take. So we have to really pay attention to not being seduced by the masquerade of wisdom and to see doubt as doubt. Because as soon as you recognize that that's what it is, then it's easy to apply the remedy of just coming back to the moment. That's the doubt of confusion. When there's connection to the moment, the mind is really not confused.

When it's the doubt of not knowing—two choices, "Should I do this? Should I do that?"—this comes up not only in practice, but maybe even more in life. A life situation where there's a choice and it's just not clear which is the right thing to do.

I had a mini satori around that issue. I was confronting a situation like that, where there was a juncture in my life with two choices, and I just didn't know. At a certain point, I was driving myself crazy trying to decide. It was a moment of revelation when I realized that it's okay not to know. Sometimes we don't know until we know. We're faced with a choice and we don't know—and we can get okay with not knowing. That became a little mantra for me: "It's okay not to know."

And it's something you might look at. Maybe this does not apply to all of you, but I found that until that moment—and then in looking back—I realized how uncomfortable the feeling of not knowing was. It was that discomfort which kept driving me to think, "I have to make a decision because it's too uncomfortable not to know." So it was a great relief to just settle into "It's okay not to know." At a certain point, the decision will be made either because you get some clarity about it or the time passes for having made the decision. The decision will be made in that way.

There was a student of Krishnamurti—do you know who Krishnamurti was? A great Indian teacher. He had a student, a woman named Vimala Thakar. Krishnamurti wanted her to begin teaching, and she was very reluctant. She didn't want to. He kept urging her, and she wouldn't do it. Finally, he said to her, "The reason you don't want to start teaching is you're afraid to make mistakes. Don't be afraid to make mistakes."

I think that could be playing into what you described—here on retreat, during the course of the day, there are lots of little choice points. So instead of being caught up in the doubting mind and obsessing about which is right, I think if a decision has to be made in the moment, you take your best guess at what's wholesome. And then you pay attention. You'll see, "Oh, that was a good decision."

Or that wasn't, you know, and you really learn something from that. So I think the important thing is simply to free the mind from being caught in the wavering of perplexity—either in the sense of recognizing that it's okay not to know, or just making a choice and then paying attention to what the effect is. We learn from our mistakes if it was a mistake. Or really bringing the mind back at that point very precisely to the moment's experience and seeing if the clarity of that actually allows for a clear understanding to emerge.

This is really important. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to recognize doubt as a hindrance. Because of all the hindrances, it is said—and I've experienced this and observed it in others—doubt is the most dangerous in terms of the practice. With all the others, whether it's desire or aversion or sleepiness, restlessness even, the mind is kind of in the ballpark of the experience. It's not relating to it in a skillful way, but it's

there with what's happening, maybe with greed or aversion. But with doubt, we're not even in the ballpark. The mind is just caught up in some mental proliferation. And it's very seductive.

So we really need to learn to recognize it and to name it: "This is the doubting mind." And then approach it either in some of the ways I mentioned, or maybe you'll be creative and find some other ways. But it's really important to see it, to name it, to disidentify with the doubt. Because as long as we're caught in that, we don't go anyplace.

There was one yogi on a three-month retreat many years ago—I don't know, maybe thirty years ago—who spent three months asking, "Should I do metta or vipassana?" Every interview. And I'd say, "Just choose one, it doesn't really matter. They're both great." Then he would do one for a day, and then again the doubt would arise. It was a classic example of the dangers of doubt, because he couldn't land. So it's really important to keep an eye out for it and to be able to recognize it.

Someone asked about wanting and not wanting—whether it's a certain feeling of lack that drives the wanting, and what one can do about that. This question goes to the heart of what the Buddha taught. The Four Noble Truths are all in that question, and it's of great interest to me.

Sometimes the feeling of lack is obvious, and we can see how that is driving a wanting or a craving. Sometimes it's simply the seduction of some pleasure. We may be feeling totally fine, and then a thought arises. This is something I've often noticed on retreat. I can be practicing, sitting or walking, and then the thought will come, "Oh, a cup of tea. That would be nice." I really wasn't feeling a lack, but the thought came, and then there was a certain seduction—that'll be pleasant. And then I'd be mindful and the desire would go away. And then about three and a half seconds later, the thought would come up again: "Oh, cup of tea." And I'd note it, and it would go away.

This could go on for quite a while. It's very humbling by the eleventh or twelfth time when it comes up and then you watch yourself going for the cup of tea. The power of the desire, the power of the craving, is strong. Sometimes the image that comes to mind is like a blade of grass that will come up through concrete. It's very small, but it has a deep driving force to it.

So desire or craving is like that.

One of the things in my practice—and this is something I've been exploring recently, just in the last few years really—is understanding craving not as limited to these pleasant ideas of experiences that we'll enjoy. The Buddha talked about three kinds of craving: craving for sense pleasures, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming.

I began to see in my meditation—and I'm sure you've had this experience because it's so common—that we can be doing the practice, we're in this moment, we're in the moment, but we're with this *in order for* this. It's like we're leaning into the process. We're with the in-breath in order to feel the out-breath, or we're with the breath in order to feel more calm, or in order to concentrate. I call it the "in-order-to mind." And it's a kind of leaning into the next moment.

I had been noticing this for years in my practice—how there's a wanting or craving for this to become that. We're with the pain in order for it to ease, or we're with a good feeling in order for it to continue. All of that I'm calling craving for becoming.

Just in the last few years, two teachings from the suttas came to mind as I was sitting, and they had a really profound effect on that deeply conditioned kind of craving, of wanting, of desiring.

The first was a discourse where the Buddha used some images to describe the five aggregates. He used the image of the body, the physical elements, as a heap of foam—like foam on water. All the sensations in the body he described as just a heap of foam. Feelings, vedanā, he described as bubbles in a stream. Perception is a mirage. All the mental formations are like a plantain or banana tree whose trunk has no core—there's no pith to the trunk of a banana tree, it's just layers with nothing at the center. And consciousness is a magic show.

I started taking just the very first image: the body as a lump or heap of foam. I'd be sitting and just feeling the body, not necessarily having the mind go to particular sensations, but just the sense of the whole body sitting. You feel those energy sensations of the body, and I would bring in that image. I would let that image settle. Oh, this really is like just a lump or a heap of foam.

And the great realization in that was that it will never be anything else but a heap of foam. So there is nothing to become. There's nothing to want because there will never be anything other than what it is now, in terms of it being just a lump of foam. And in that moment, I could feel that leaning into the process completely fall away, even if just for a few moments. But you get a real experiential taste of the mind of not wanting, not craving.

Right there is the truth of dukkha—of the wanting, the leaning being the cause of dukkha—and the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving. Just in that moment we are experiencing really the fullness of those noble truths.

Does this seem clear? It was really a significant understanding, so I would encourage you to play with it and see whether it has meaning for you as well.

The other teaching from the Buddha had the same effect but came at it from a different angle. One of the lines in the suttas that one reads very often—and it's often the statement people make when they get enlightened, their expression of awakening—is where they say they understand that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

I had read that so many times. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And I always took it, reading it for years and years, as a description of impermanence. Yes, that's true—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Then I was sitting on retreat—and it's so amazing, such a magical world you're living in, especially sitting for this long. It's like this great laboratory for understanding. I was sitting, just going on with my practice, and this line came to my mind quite spontaneously: Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

But instead of just seeing it as a description, I took it as an instruction. I dropped that sentence right into the midst of what was happening moment to moment. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And just in that moment of remembering, of really understanding that in the moment, again there was a realization: there's nothing to become. Because whatever it is that we want to become will also pass away.

Do you get it? It's really profound. It's like the whole teaching is right there. There is nothing to become because whatever it is that we think we want to become is also just part of the passing show. Whatever it is—whether it's a meditative state or some experience of the body or the mind—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

So again, in that moment I could feel the mind just letting go of wanting anything. And then to really see, to pay attention to the quality of the mind in that moment that does not want anything—that's the experience of the end of craving. Even if it's just for a couple of moments of not wanting, we get a genuine taste of peace. It's the third noble truth: the end of suffering is the end of craving.

We can use these teachings around wanting or craving in this very moment-to-moment way and really experience the potential for freedom, experience the taste of it for ourselves. It's not theoretical. Of course, then we forget—we're back in the wanting to become this or that. But as some teachers say, our practice is short moments many times. It's not necessarily trying to hold on to that state, which would just be another kind of craving. But just for a moment, there's nothing to become. You can just feel everything let go.

For me, it was really very interesting. Even after all these years, after fifty years of practice, this line that I had read a million times drops in and some kind of new understanding of it opens up. That's the beauty of the Dharma—it's continually revealing itself in so many unexpected ways.

A question came about something I had said once: that every moment can be a moment of intimacy. Let me say something about that.

I've wanted to write a book for a long time. It's basically a one-paragraph book, and the title is *The Myth of Intimacy*. The myth is that it takes two to be intimate. People in their lives are looking for intimacy in an other—thinking that if I'm in a relationship with someone else, that will be how I experience intimacy. But my experience in practice over all these years is the intimacy of being totally at one with experience. When we're totally feeling the breath, or a sensation, or a sound, there's no separation. And in that non-separation—really, intimacy is non-separation.

This is why the practice, and this is what people who don't practice find very difficult to understand, can be so completely fulfilling. Just think of how somebody you know who's not familiar with meditation would react if they came and just saw people lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing—they'd probably fall asleep just watching. What a boring thing to do! And yet, I presume that at least at times you've had the experience of being so intimate with the sensations of movement. It's why people can be walking for half an hour or forty-five minutes or an hour, or sitting for very long periods, completely fulfilled in the experience—because it's so intimate. There's no separation.

It's very relieving to understand that intimacy doesn't depend on anyone else. It depends on how we're relating to the moment's experience.

In my early days in India, my first teacher was Anagarika Munindra, and he was a very quirky guy. Sometimes—this was in Bodh Gaya—we'd be walking around the villages, and he said something that at the time I thought was pretty hokey. But over the years of my practice, I totally came to appreciate it. As we were walking about, he would say, "I'm never bored. I'm friends with the clouds. I'm friends with the sun. I'm friends with whatever was around us." And it was so true—that's how he was. He was totally engaged in the moment's experience. Over the years of practice, I really came to appreciate the power of that.

So that's what I mean by every moment's experience can be a moment of intimacy—if we're really there, if we're connected, if we're aware, if we're mindful.

Some years ago I was teaching in Italy at a monastery—a Catholic monastery that a group had rented, up in the mountains of Tuscany. It was a beautiful, beautiful place. The monastery was a thousand years old. This made me think about how IMS, a couple of years ago, celebrated its fortieth anniversary, and we thought, "Yes, this is great." But that put it into perspective. I mean, it's quite amazing that that monastery had been there for a thousand years.

Above the monastery, there was a hermitage where some monks lived. We could go and visit it, and they had one little cottage—I don't know exactly what to call it—just two small rooms. Monks would be staying in them, with a little walled garden. And they went in for life, into that solitude. Perhaps they joined the other monks in the church for the liturgies during the day, but other than that, there was no communication.

So I went into this sample unit. I just wanted to get a sense of it, because the thought of somebody going in for life, that commitment—it intrigued me. I went in, and quite to my surprise—of course, I didn't go in for life, I went in for about fifteen minutes—but what surprised me was that even in those fifteen minutes, I got a glimmer, a glimmer of the joy that could be found there. In my mind I thought, "Oh yes, to go into a situation like that where one's only companion is awareness, and one spends one's life in companionship with awareness." I got so high just from the thought of it. After a couple of weeks I might not have been so high if I were actually there, but these retreats offer a taste of that. Even though it's not in solitude, there is a kind of solitude here. And the power of it, because it is so intimate with experience—there's a great joy that's possible as we drop into that.

A practitioner shared, "I've heard some of this from you, on and off, for almost twenty years now. There's always been so much we've had from you. But wow. Thank you. Just to thank you."

To me, this is one of the most amazing things about the practice and about retreats like this. The Dharma is vast. It's just so vast as we're going into the nature of the mind and consciousness, and how our lives are the manifestation of that, and how even after decades and decades of practice, new things are continually emerging—new insights and new ways of seeing things and of unhooking. This is what makes it so extraordinary. It's really an extraordinary journey.

Someone then asked about overconcentration. He explained that he'd been experiencing what I sometimes call the "beautiful breath"—the energy in the breath becoming quite vivid, sensation arising in space, where you don't really know exactly where the boundaries are. But he noticed that when practicing this at home, he went to speak with his father afterward and really didn't understand a word his father said. He didn't

know who he was. It was very strange. He also noticed that when he had an incessant thought about wanting to ask me a question and then went to bed, everything was totally lost—he didn't even remember that he'd been thinking about it constantly. And it wasn't so pleasant because the energy in the mind felt slightly different.

So the question was about what happens when the mind becomes very one-pointed, absorbed in the breath, and then there's difficulty coming out of it—feeling disoriented from having been so deeply immersed in that experience, struggling to relate even in ordinary conversation.

I would say a couple of things. It might be interesting in that state, when you're really immersed in the breath, to take some periods of time within it—maybe five minutes or ten minutes at a time—to use some mental noting. I don't know if you've ever used that as a tool, but not only noting the breath itself but also noting the mind state. So you might be noting "calm, calm, peaceful," or if there's light, you might note "seeing"—whatever your experience is. It could be that the concentration is getting stronger than the mindfulness.

But in making these adjustments, it's like a very delicate adjustment. It doesn't take much. It might just take a little bit to up the level of mindfulness within that very experience. I would include the noting of the mind state as well as the actual physical sensation of the breath. And it would just be interesting to see if then the transition from that state—opening the eyes, standing up, and doing whatever you do next—whether there's a more unbroken continuity without that sense of disjointedness.

Now, regarding the question about fear coming up in the practice—just as an example, what might there be fear of? What's the experience you might be having that is conditioning the fear to arise? Something to do with seeing that there is no outside world and no inside world, something like that.

There are a couple of things I can share. I've worked a lot with fear. Of all the afflictive emotions, just in the course of my practice, that was the one most predominant in my conditioning. So I have a lot of experience with it. There were times when the fear was so strong in my practice that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It was completely irrational, but for whatever reason that emotion was just let loose. It was very powerful and disorienting.

One thing that's really important is to become mindful of your relationship to fear itself. How are you relating to the fear? We can be relating to fear in a wide variety of ways. One way—and this sounds like it might be happening to some extent—is where we get identified with the fear and are really caught up in it. That influences how we're relating to the rest of our experience because we're identified with the fear.

Another way, which I fell into for a long time, was aversion to the fear. Because it's really unpleasant—it's like the mental equivalent of physical pain. Fear is an unpleasant emotion, and so very often the fear would arise, and I would be recognizing it and even noting it: "fear, fear, fear"—but always with the wanting it to go away.

This illuminated a really important distinction for me, one I think is essential for all of us in practice: there's a difference between recognition and mindfulness. Very often we think if we recognize something, we're being mindful. But as I was doing, I was recognizing the fear—"fear, fear, fear"—but it was not mindfulness because I was recognizing it through the filter of aversion, of not liking it, of wanting it to go away.

And so there was a big turning point for me—and this took a long time, years actually. I'm hoping what I'm saying might spare you a couple of years of practice. I was doing walking meditation right outside here during a retreat, having worked with this for a long, long time, and then something just settled. I really got accepting of the feeling of fear. That acceptance was expressed in the thought in my mind: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay."

And that changed everything, because that was the first moment of acceptance. All that time before, I knew it, I recognized it, but I was not accepting it. As soon as I dropped into "okay, fear"—just like with physical pain—"okay, it's unpleasant, but it's okay. It's okay to feel it"—that became a little mantra for me with a lot of difficult things, but particularly with fear. It's okay.

That became my mantra. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. And the whole mass of fear just washed through. It was amazing. Something that I had felt so locked into—I had built this whole story about myself as a fearful person, convinced I would need thirty years of therapy to unwind it. I was creating an entire self-image and narrative around this fear. But as soon as I could accept it—it's okay—everything shifted.

Now, this doesn't mean fear never comes up again, but the relationship to it is completely different. So that's one big piece. I would really look at how you're relating to fear, allowing the fear itself to become the object not only of your recognition but of genuine mindfulness—which means accepting. Fear is like this. Fear feels like this. This could really change your relationship to it.

As you move through certain meditative experiences—because we are deconstructing some very long-established habit patterns of mind, the core one being this very reified sense of self—our whole life has been revolving around this idea. Meditation begins to loosen that a bit, and it can get fearful at times. We're often in unknown territory. Learning how to be okay with fear allows us to settle into whatever experience is unfolding.

There's one other piece. Sometimes the fear gets overwhelming. We've tried to really be with it, to be mindful of it, to get okay with it, but for whatever reason, at some particular time, we don't have the capacity to open to the fear itself. We feel the mind getting out of balance. When that happens, it can be helpful to back off a little, to take ourselves out of that particular experience. If you're sitting, it might be okay to go for a walk, or to open to sounds, to listening—just to change the arena of your experience in a way that brings you back to some kind of balance. Then, when you feel balanced in your practice, you can return to it, willing to enter into it a little bit and see whether you can stay balanced even in the experience of fear. That mental balance within the experience is what's important.

This would be good to discuss with your teachers, because sometimes they can see whether you're actually out of balance. People sometimes think they're out of balance, or they're really anxious about what's happening, but the teacher can often perceive whether it's really okay. They would encourage you to stay with it, open to it, be with the fear—it's okay. Or they may see that you're getting truly out of balance and need to move away from that for a while. These are two different approaches, but this is not uncommon. The fact that fear is arising, in and of itself, is not a problem, because it commonly arises at different times. So you can try the magic mantra: it's okay, it's okay.

An image might help—and this might be a nice note to end on. An image I've found helpful in dealing with difficult mind states and emotions, fear being a good example among many: How would you be with a child who's really afraid? I think instinctively we would all know the appropriate way to be with that child. If the child is really scared, we would probably just be there. Either in words or simply through how we are, we would express that sense: it's okay. We wouldn't deny it, saying, "Oh no, you're not really feeling that." And we probably wouldn't say, "Just stop it," or "You shouldn't be feeling that." No, we would know. We would just be there—putting our arm around the child, supporting them, being in the experience with them, trying to create a place of safety.

I think we all know this very instinctively. But what's interesting is that we know what to do if it were a child, yet we don't apply it to ourselves. When we're the ones caught up in the difficult emotion, we can get all tangled up in our reactivity to it.

So you might just see if that image is of some help.

I could go on and we could go on, but if we did, when I go back into the staff room with my colleagues, I'd be hearing about it.

So it's really a delight. Thank you for the opportunity.

CHAPTER 35

# Questions and Answers

Joseph Goldstein · 1h07

> *In this intimate Q&A session from the three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses a wide range of questions from practitioners with characteristic wisdom and personal transparency. He shares how aging has shifted his practice from technique-focused striving toward a love of Dhamma and genuine interest in understanding—a transformation that has made practice more enjoyable and less burdened by the gaining idea.*
>
> *Goldstein offers profound guidance on working with fear and anxiety, distinguishing between mere recognition and true mindfulness. He recounts his own breakthrough moment when he finally accepted fear completely, realizing that recognition through the filter of aversion is not genuine mindfulness. For trauma-related difficulties, he advises a careful, balanced approach of touching difficult experiences briefly, then returning to neutral ground. He also addresses grief and upekkhā practice, suggesting we find our own authentic phrases that express our deepest wishes for those who suffer.*
>
> *Perhaps most striking is his teaching on "not wanting" as the essence of practice. Drawing from the simple sutta phrase "whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away," he describes how dropping into genuine non-craving—even momentarily—reveals the peace and freedom the Buddha pointed to. This transforms practice from an abstract pursuit of enlightenment into immediate, accessible liberation. The session also touches on building saṅgha, working with sexual energy mindfully, the empty nature of thought, and the importance of "letting be" rather than "letting go."*

Good evening.

Some of my colleagues were supposed to be here passing around the mic, but maybe they're out having pizza or something. So Roberta very graciously offered to pass the mic around. If you have any questions—not too difficult ones.

*How has the aging of your body affected your meditation practice?*

It's been a gradual process, as you probably are aware of as well. Mostly it's affected in terms of how I sit. It's been quite a few years now since I can sit cross-legged. That was a bit of a transition, having just sat cross-legged all the time and then going to a chair. But in terms of the mind, I would say it's just gotten better.

I'm going to paraphrase something. I was just recently teaching in France, and afterwards some friends and I went to Barcelona. In Barcelona there's the famous church by Gaudí—it's quite remarkable. There was a saying on one of the walls. This is just going to be a paraphrase; I wish I could remember it exactly. I guess he was relating it to architecture, perhaps art, but it really resonated with me in terms of meditation practice. It was something like: art or architecture or the practice, if it's done without love, is just a technique.

That just resonated with me, really in relationship to what you asked, because in looking back at how I practiced earlier on, it was much more about learning a technique and trying to understand it and maybe master the technique to whatever extent possible. But over all these years of practice, the quality has changed. It's not so much about technique and it's not so much about getting anything. You could almost say it's more about love of the Dharma and just interest in understanding. That quality really infuses the practice now, and it's been a relief because there's much less of a gaining idea with it and more the idea of understanding.

So whatever's going on in my mind—the ups and downs, times of difficulty, times of ease, whatever it is—instead of going through those experiences with an underlying self-assessment of "How am I doing? Am I doing it right?"—it's more just, "Well, what is going on now?" If there's some kind of suffering, what's happening in my mind that's creating it?

This has been, I think, a progression as I've gotten older, and it feels much more holistic, much more complete, much more enjoyable. The body will do its thing and it imposes its own limitations, but the mind can really be on a trajectory of greater understanding.

*Could you speak about practicing with anxiety and fear, especially in connection to trauma?*

Well, there is a whole spectrum there. I worked a lot with fear earlier on in my practice—that was, I would say, the primary afflictive emotion for me, in terms of the different ones that come up for different people. That was the strongest for me, but it wasn't so much related to trauma, which is its own category of experience. So I'll just talk a little bit about working with fear—non-traumatic fear—and then make a few comments about how one can work with it when it's really rooted in some trauma in one's life.

I've given whole talks on this, so I'm going to distill the main point in just a few minutes. The key turning point in my working with fear—and this can be applied to really anything that's arising in our practice—is that after years of working with it (this

was not a quick process, but it could be quicker; you could do it quicker than I did, so that's why I'll tell you): what I finally learned is understanding the difference between recognition and mindfulness. For a long time I did not see that distinction. I thought if I recognized what was there and could name it and label it, I was being mindful.

So when this fear would come up—and it was not fear about anything in particular, it was really irrational fear; I have no idea where it came from, but there were times when that energy was so strong that I'd be afraid to go from sitting to standing—completely irrational, but there it was, a powerful energy arising. And I'd be noting "fear, fear, fear, fear," and it didn't dislodge it in any way.

Finally, at one point—I was just doing walking meditation actually, right outside here—something shifted. This is after years, intermittently, of working with it. Something shifted, and the shift was expressed in the thought in my mind: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay."

And I realized that was the first moment in all that time that I actually accepted it. In all the previous time, I recognized it, but I wanted it to go away.

It's unpleasant. So there was aversion in the mind, even as I was noting fear, fear, fear.

Recognition is not mindfulness. Because recognition—we can be recognizing things through different filters in the mind, whether it's the filter of aversion or the filter of desire or grasping. So seeing that distinction between recognition and mindfulness, which implies an acceptance of what it is that's arising—it's okay. It's okay to feel this. It's unpleasant. It doesn't make it pleasant, but it's okay to feel the unpleasantness.

And it was amazing that just in that moment when I finally dropped into a place of genuinely accepting—because we can't fool the mind. We could tell ourselves we're accepting it, but if we're not, it's not going to work. So there has to be a coming to that genuine place. It's okay. It's really okay to feel this. If it's here for the rest of my life, it's okay. In that moment of genuine acceptance, I could feel that whole ball of fear wash through in a way that it never had before.

And it's not to say that fear never comes up again, but the relationship to it now is completely different. It's okay. It's just another passing feeling. So that's the general framework with which to work, whether it's anxiety or fear or anything else.

When it's rooted in trauma, I think first it's really good to work with somebody who is familiar with that in terms of giving guidance in how to work with it. But we need somewhat more care, because when things are trauma-based, sometimes it's not appro-

priate to dive right into the middle of it—it can trigger a very strong traumatic response. And so there's a much more balanced dance we have to do of kind of opening to it a little bit, seeing how the mind is doing. If it feels like it's getting overwhelming or out of balance, we need to back up, maybe bring the mind to a more neutral place or even a pleasant experience to give the mind a little rest and balance. Then maybe touch it again briefly, come back to a place of greater ease. And so there's a back and forth involved in that.

This is just a general guideline. But as I say, working with somebody, if the trauma is very strong and conditioning powerful experiences—it's definitely workable, but it needs care.

It's very interesting, and I'm sure after sitting for six weeks or three months, I'm just curious whether your mind ever does what I'm about to say. And my guess is that it does. Generally—and this is just so common—we assess our sittings based on whether they're pleasant or unpleasant. Maybe you come in and have a really difficult sitting with a lot of pain in the body, maybe restlessness and boredom. And you get up and somebody asks you, "How was your sitting?" "Oh, it was a terrible sitting today." Or maybe you sit and it's light and concentrated and blissful. "Oh, great sitting!"

We tend to assess sitting based on whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. But that is completely beside the point. The wise assessment of the sitting is really how mindful we were of whatever is arising. And so when there's unpleasantness, can we be with that with the same equanimity as we are with what's pleasant? That's really what we want to be paying attention to.

But it takes a lot of remembering, because the tendency is—and in a way it's normal—I think all of us on the path are a bit abnormal, because the normal way people live is they want what's pleasant and they don't want what's unpleasant. Go up to anybody in the street, and of course that's just what makes sense. But that's not the path of practice.

The Buddha gave one very striking teaching which always makes me sit up straight. He said, "As long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible." That's quite a statement, and it shows the work we need to do, because that conditioning is so powerful. We like what's pleasant, we don't like what's unpleasant.

But you've probably had at least times in your practice here where the mind really was in an equanimous place, even for short periods of time. Pleasant. Fine. We're just aware of it. Oh, pleasant. Or it's unpleasant.

It's okay. It's fine. There's no aversion to it, no reactivity to it. That's what we're developing in the practice. And so with the unpleasant emotions—and again, where trauma is involved that takes a certain kind of care—but the general principle is that we learn to open to the pleasant and the unpleasant equally. And that's challenging.

*Question: Now that I'm in my 70s, close friends are starting to get sick with things like cancer, and a dear friend of mine just lost his lifelong partner, who was also a dear friend of mine. I also have an adult son who has a debilitating autistic condition. How do I do upekkha practice when these people I love and I are suffering from things that are not of their own actions?*

I would really consider what you would most wish for them. With the metta phrases or the compassion phrases, we have to be careful, along with the vipassana practice, not to get too fixated on the technique of them, but really try to connect with their essence.

Let me give you an example of how we can mold the phrases to the situation. I was teaching a retreat just after 9/11, and it was in upstate New York, so there were a lot of New Yorkers there. We were doing the metta practice and the question came up: how in the world could I ever wish these people, who caused so much destruction and death, to be happy? There was just no way they could find that space in themselves.

This really made me reflect. If metta is truly a universal quality, a boundless quality, what would that look like—sending metta to people who have created so much destruction and harm? It took a little reflection on my part, but I was genuinely interested in that question. At a certain point I realized there was definitely a way to do metta practice in that situation, but it required reframing it.

For me, the phrases became, in thinking of those people who caused so much harm and devastation: May you be free of hatred. May you be free of delusion. May you be free of fear. Is there anybody that we would exclude from the wish, "May you be free of hatred"? No. And so it becomes a way of embracing everybody with that basic feeling of connectedness as a fellow human being. But we have to find the right expression for it.

With people close to you who are going through either a dying process or other difficulties, I would look in your heart and see: given this situation they're in, what is your deepest heartfelt wish for them? It might be something as simple as, "May your heart be at ease." But you have to find your own words for your own feeling and intention. I think that's the way to do it, and it's definitely possible in any circumstance. It's just finding the right language.

*Question: How did you start such a beautiful sangha? What is needed for a sangha like this to happen or flourish? This comes because where I live there is no sangha or community.*

When I think back to the beginning years, even before IMS, when I was still living in India—I think the process starts with coming to some place in our own practice where we feel there's enough understanding that it would be valuable to share. It's probably not a good idea to do a meditation weekend and then go out and set up oneself as a teacher, which sometimes happens. But also it doesn't mean one waits for fifty years.

When there's a real devotion to the practice and you've done enough to feel confident in your understanding, then you can begin. I'll just reflect about when I was in India. There were other Westerners there practicing, and we would go up to the mountains during the summer months because it was so hot on the plains. Many of us were living in Dalhousie, one of what they call the hill stations—beautiful, seven thousand feet, overlooking the Himalayas. People would rent different cottages and spend the hot season up there.

I just started offering to lead a meditation and give a mini dharma talk once a week. Anybody who was interested would just come. But week after week, it kind of built a sangha. We'd have a discussion afterwards. Sometimes it's just as simple as becoming a focal point for people who are interested and then sharing what you're able to share. That's really how it happened. Then more people heard and more people came.

And then at a certain point, one of my teachers asked if I would teach a short retreat. So it's a very organic process. But it just started with my own practice. I began feeling at a certain point, "Oh, there are some things I understand that I can share." It's not really complicated or mystical.

And also, depending on one's personality type, sometimes people overestimate themselves, but sometimes people underestimate themselves—a kind of holding back even when it really would be a good thing to share what they know. But for most people, at least in the beginning and even more than the beginning, motivations will be mixed. So if we're waiting for ourselves to be totally saintly before we share the Dharma, it'll probably be a reasonably long wait.

For me, what's most important as people get into some kind of sharing role is just to stay very attuned to the different motivations that are arising in the mind—not to expect that they're going to all be totally pure.

Just as an example of that: when people would come for those weekly talks, and I was just beginning—it was the first sharing I had really done—every week before I gave the talk, I would count how many people came. "Oh, this week eight people came. Oh, only five people came this week. Maybe the last week wasn't so good." My mind just did that. Not the most wholesome motivation. But I would just see that arise in my mind. It would come and it would be there, and I would see it go. And then I would get into it and the sharing felt very pure. As I was actually speaking the Dharma, it's like the Dharma energy took over.

But if I had seen that part of my mind which was not so pure and said, "Oh, I shouldn't be doing this," I think that would have been a mistake, because we do have mixed motives about a lot of different things.

One more story about motivation, which I'm sure you've heard a lot about over these weeks. Attuning to one's motivations—about anything, about the practice, about our speech, about how we act in the world. The motivation behind the action, as you know, that's really the determining factor for the karmic potential of that act. It's the motivation behind it that determines whether it's skillful or unskillful.

But how often do we actually, for example in speech—it's not very common, I think, for people to take that moment to reflect: "Okay, why am I saying this? What's the motive behind it?" Usually the words just come spilling out, which you've had a break from now for six weeks or three months. But starting tomorrow and being out in the world, you'll be back in that realm of a lot of talking. Right speech is a huge arena for our practice. It's been so valuable for me because we talk a lot. But as I said, mostly we're not paying attention to the motive.

So this is just one other little motivation story. I was on retreat once, and I was reading some of the suttas. I came across a passage, a story in one of the discourses, that I thought my colleague Sharon Salzberg, who was writing a book at the time—this would be a good story for her book. So that was my first thought. I read this and thought, "Oh yeah, Sharon would really like this. I'll tell her about it."

And then my very next thought was—knowing that as a teacher, a good story is gold—"No, no, I'm going to keep this story for myself. This is too good to just give away."

So I saw that thought. And then I said, "Well, that's just being selfish. No, I'll give her the story. But I'll tell her what I went through so she'll feel a little indebted."

I was just watching my mind go through this whole train of different motivations. And at a certain point, I was basically amused by it. I was just watching my mind do this. And then I asked myself, "Well, where in the midst of all this is there any purity of motivation?" And I realized there was—in that very first moment. That was just that spontaneous motivation of being generous.

I realize that even though we may have a whole train of other kinds of motivations that follow, if we're mindful and we see it and we don't act from them, we can always come back to that very first generous impulse. This is why it's important to be aware of our motives but without the expectation that they all have to be perfectly pure before we can act. Because maybe until we are arahants, the mind is a mix of different qualities and different motivations.

And it's mindfulness which lets us see all of that and then choose: which one am I going to feed? Which one am I going to try to act on? And which can I just let go of?

---

*Question from participant about struggling with subtle expectations during retreat*

You know, having been practicing for so many years now, I feel like I've fallen into every possible hole that one can fall in. So it all sounds familiar to me.

A big problem arises when we have some idea in our mind of enlightenment or the deathless, but it's an abstraction. We just have some notion of what it might be, and then we can drive ourselves a little crazy—either in striving mode and over-efforting, or just in confusion about where the practice is going and what it's really about.

What I'm about to suggest is a practice which, for me, takes it out of the realm of abstraction and gives even a mini taste of what the practice is really about at its deepest level.

The preface to this little teaching is a line found commonly in the suttas. Sometimes when people hear it, they actually get enlightened just hearing it. At other times, this very same line is the expression of somebody's moment of realization. And it's so simple—I mean, totally simple—that for years I read it and thought, "Oh yes, that's obvious."

The line is: *Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.*

A basic statement of impermanence. I'd read it a million times and never gave it more thought because it seemed so obvious.

But a couple of years ago, I was on a self-retreat, just sitting, somewhat deep in my practice, and this line arose in my mind: *Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.* Because I was sitting, and because—as I was saying before—instead of the practice being merely a technique, I was asking what does that technique actually mean in terms of this experience right now? That sentence dropped right into the midst of the momentary unfolding—the breath and sensations and thoughts, just the usual meditative flow of experience.

And in that moment I realized: if whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, therefore there's nothing to want. Because whatever it is I might be wanting on a meditative level will also pass away.

Two things happened. One is I could feel my mind drop back from a wanting that I hadn't even known was there. Are you familiar with the experience—and I think this is quite common, perhaps the predominant aspect of meditative experience—where just on a very subtle energetic level, we're leaning into the next moment? We're with the in-breath in order for the out-breath, or we're with a certain sensation in order for it to open. There's some kind of leaning into the next moment, as if the next moment will resolve everything.

But of course, it never does, because whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And so we're continually in this leaning into the process.

When this thought came, and I realized therefore there's nothing to want—

Right in that moment, just with that phrase—there's nothing to want—I could feel the mind drop back from any wanting for a moment. Any leaning into the next moment. And it was so striking, the difference between not wanting and leaning into.

I realized in that moment that really what we're practicing, or what we should be practicing, is not wanting. That's what the practice is about. It's not about gaining experience. But we don't practice that way. Generally, and I see it in myself, a good part of the time I'm with this in order for something to happen. Instead of not wanting—that's where the freedom is.

And it's expressed by the Buddha; it's built into the Four Noble Truths. There's dukkha and the cause, which is craving, and the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving. And in the Buddha's enlightenment song after his great awakening—you know, the famous "house builder" quote: "House builder, you have now been seen, you will build no house again," this house of self. And then he ends that with: "Realized is the unconditioned, achieved is the end of craving." It's as explicit a statement of freedom as you can get. Achieved is the end of craving.

My problem had been that I had always seen that as a far-off goal. Okay, I'll practice for the next five lifetimes and maybe I'll get to the end of craving. And it was revelatory to realize that yes, the final end of craving may be sometime in the future, but we can actually touch that and experience that in any moment. Maybe just for a moment, but we get a real taste of the peace and freedom of not wanting.

So just as a meditative experiment, if you're interested: as you're practicing, when you get into the flow, whatever's happening, maybe just start dropping in the whole phrase—"Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, therefore there's nothing to want." Or just shorten it to "not wanting," or "there's nothing to want." And see if bringing that to mind affects a shift in your experience and in your practice. I think it might well. Again, just for the moment: there's nothing to want.

These days, I actually use that quite a lot, reminding myself that this is the practice. It's not about wanting, and it's not about getting, which can tie one up in knots. But the not wanting is always accessible, again, even if it's just for a moment.

One last piece to this. The reason I'm going on and on about it is because it really had quite a profound impact on my practice, so I think it's significant. If you experiment with this and explore this, and you're just going along with "nothing to want," and then if you recognize that moment of dropping back from the leaning into the next moment—just become aware as best you can of the experience or the quality of the mind that doesn't want. In that moment, what's that like? What does that moment feel like?

I think you'll experience that in the moment of not wanting—I'm talking now primarily on the meditative level; there's another whole discussion about what that might mean in the world—but specifically about the meditative process: there's nothing to want. There is a momentary experience of peace, of stillness, of completion. It's all there in that moment. The end of craving for the moment, or for two moments. But it gives you a real taste rather than it being some abstraction that you're thinking about.

So I don't know whether that addressed your question, but it would definitely bring your mind to a place of ease, greater ease. There's so much to say about right effort and too much effort.

"You were speaking about motivation earlier, intention. The last couple of days I was noticing—I kind of called it a 'not true' practice—I was noticing whenever there wasn't mindfulness and the mind was just doing its stories, it was always not true. I was kind of floored. Just 'not true,' that's not true. It was like whenever there was just a bare mindful moment. And then Jaya suggested, you know, 'okay, a couple of days of telling yourself everything is not true'..."

Maybe look at the intention before the thought. What's the intention behind the thought? And the intention is always—well, nothing's always—but becoming, just I-making.

So there are two levels of working with thoughts. One level, we could say this is kind of the relative level of discerning which thoughts are wholesome, which are unwholesome, which are beneficial, which are not beneficial. On that level, you were discerning. This is a whole category of thoughts that are unwholesome or not beneficial, not true. So in a way you're fulfilling already that level of mindfulness in just that discernment.

On a deeper level, it's really exploring the nature of thought as opposed to the content of the thought. A question that I often suggest people ask themselves, especially when there's a lot of thinking, when you're on a thinking jag, is to ask: what is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is it as a phenomenon?

This gets very interesting, really interesting. And it's something I think very few people ever do. Mostly we are just caught up—either lost in or reactive to—the content, the story of what's being said. Very rarely do people really stop and ask: what is thought as a phenomenon?

When you look in that way, it's so interesting. What is a thought? We have endless times to practice this. We see that a thought is little more than nothing. It's so ephemeral and so insubstantial. And what is so remarkable is that when we're not mindful of the thinking, thought has huge power in our lives. We're the slaves of our thoughts. Go here, go there, do this, do that. We're just running after whatever the thoughts are telling us to do. They have all this power when we're unaware, not mindful.

And when we are mindful of the nature of thought, when we ask, "What is a thought?"—it has no power at all. On that level, the content doesn't matter. You don't even have to bother figuring anything out because you're seeing the very empty nature of thought itself.

I find this incredibly interesting. Something which can have so much power when we're not mindful and have no power when we are—well, that's worth paying attention to. And there's a lot of freedom that comes. It's more than just seeing it once. We need to practice seeing the empty nature of thought over and over again until it's so deep within us that, at least for a good part of the time, we don't take our thoughts so seriously. It's just this empty phenomenon. The content is irrelevant on that level. When we're

about to act, that's when we want to tune in to the content level, to that discernment: is this helpful or not helpful? But in the meditation practice itself, we can go to the more fundamental level. It's very freeing.

Just as an exercise, you might also pay attention—and this I found extremely interesting. In the course of the day when we're moving about, whether on retreat or off retreat, we have an endless number of quickly passing thoughts that go through the mind. For the most part, they're not problematic. They may not even be troublesome. They're just like that. Because they're not dramatic or problematic, what I noticed is that I hardly paid attention to them. They didn't seem to be a problem.

But then at a certain point, I did start paying attention. And I realized that even though they may last for a short time, maybe five seconds or ten seconds, and maybe not be particularly problematic, for that five or ten seconds, I was back in a dream state—not aware that the thought was there. And I saw that a lot of these very light thoughts, in one way or another, were self-referential. Maybe it's a plan, maybe it's a memory, but something to do with the sense of I.

A phrase that I started using when I noticed this was: I'm just dreaming myself into existence. Every time I'm lost in a thought, it's like a dream, even if it's short and not problematic. It's very interesting. When you go home, just as an experiment, see what it's like to set the intention—even maybe take ten minutes—with a strong resolve: I'm going to really be aware of these quickly passing thoughts. It's very interesting to see.

how much of the time that we think we're awake, we're actually asleep. Because these lapses are just for short periods—it's like mini-naps, where we just drop off, we're lost, and then five or ten seconds later we're aware again. But this happens very often. And so to bring attention to that really opens something up.

A practitioner raised a question about sexual pleasure and awakening, noting that in two years of practice, they had encountered very little teaching on this topic. They wondered why, given how important sexuality is in human life, there seemed to be so few dharma talks addressing it directly. The follow-up was whether I could recommend teachers or books on the subject.

As you say, it's a huge topic because sexual energy is so primal and so powerful. There's a whole spectrum of ways of relating to that energy.

On retreat, where we take the precept to refrain from sexual activity—which doesn't mean that sexual energy doesn't arise within us, because it's easy to spend a long time lost in sexual fantasies; at different times they arise and can be really powerful—being in this kind of environment gives us the chance to really become intimate with the energy itself within us and to examine how we're relating to it.

One of the great lessons on this level is the understanding or realization that emerges through direct experience. We're just sitting, we're with the breath and bodily sensations, and maybe strong sexual energy starts to arise—perhaps triggered by some fantasy, or maybe the energy itself starts to create fantasies. We can feel it in the body, sometimes very strongly, and it can get very pleasurable.

I remember, going back years, the first time when the mind got a little concentrated and I was having these kinds of experiences—oh, this is fun! In some way the meditation was just opening to a fuller experience of that energy within myself. And so for quite a while it was, "Let me go sit."

Then after some time, and it took quite a long time, the next phase was, "Okay, enough already." I was getting annoyed at it because after indulging it for quite a while, I recognized that this was not what I was seeking in this context. And so when it came, I would get a little impatient.

Then finally, it came to a place of real equanimity. I just settled back, and when it was there, I could simply be with it—with a lot less attachment to it or feeding it, and without any pushing it away. It was just another experience.

What was instructive about that process was how it countered the notion that with sexual energy—and many other things as well—the choice is either we're expressing it or we're suppressing it. That was what had been in my mind. But the meditation showed that there is a middle way between those two, where we're not expressing it, especially in this context, but we're also not suppressing it. We can sit and really be open to feeling whatever those sensations and energies are—and they're usually very pleasant—but we can be with them, and they pass by themselves. Because everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away. So it's not suppressing it and it's not expressing it. It's just allowing that experience to arise, to do whatever it's going to do, and to pass away like everything else. There comes to be a real equanimity with respect to that powerful energy.

This is a really important understanding. One time, Sayadaw U Pandita was giving a talk about sense desire. He was speaking in Burmese, and he went on for maybe five or ten minutes. Then the translator rendered what he said into four words: "Lust cracks the brain."

Lust cracks the brain.

In my experience, this is completely true. When we're in a lustful state of mind, we can go crazy. You just have to read any newspaper.

There are so many unskillful actions that can happen when people are captured by strong lust. It really can cloud everything. So that's why what I've been saying previously about coming to an understanding of that energy where there's balance—where we're not suppressing it, we're not necessarily expressing it—means we're not so prone to getting totally identified with it when it arises and acting in ways that might not be helpful. So that's a meditative way of relating to strong sexual desire when it arises.

Then the question is, most of us are not leading the monastic life with its own set of guidelines. As lay people, for many of us, sexual activity is an important part of one's life. Leaving aside the use of that energy in some esoteric spiritual way—in some schools of Buddhism, in Tantra, there are practices that I'm not familiar with, so that's why I'm leaving them aside for now. There might be ways of actually channeling that specific energy in a particular meditative discipline. For that, you would have to speak with teachers who do those practices. I know that at least in some of the Tibetan traditions they talk about this, but I'm really not familiar.

So leaving that end of the spectrum aside, just as lay people in the world involved in relationships and sexual desire and intimacy, it's really the same practice of being mindful, being attentive, being aware, being sensitive, not causing harm, seeing what the motive is. Is it really coming from a place of love? There are many aspects that mindfulness will illuminate. And because it is such a powerful energy, I think it is important that we really pay attention to how we engage with it.

So that was a long answer that really says: be mindful, even as we're engaged in all the activities of life. But this one is a particularly powerful energy for many people, and to really bring that sensitivity and mindfulness to it is a great and important practice.

The next question: What does letting go mean to you? And do you think that there will ever come a day when all minds have released illusion?

Two questions. The first one is answerable and the second one is not.

Perhaps a better expression than letting go is letting be. Because letting go in a way implies a doing. Letting be just implies allowing things to unfold. And because everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away, the letting go happens by itself if we're letting be—because then things are just arising and passing and we're not interfering with that process.

As you've all gotten deeply involved in the practice, I have a tremendous appreciation for how powerfully language conditions our experience. Sometimes when we get caught or we're in a struggle or confused, very often it's because of how we're languaging something. It's not actually the experience itself. This is an example. We could use the phrase "letting go" and that might call up all kinds of questions—well, what does that mean and how do I do it? The simple shift to "letting be" might be a much more accessible way of experiencing things. So it's interesting just to look at language and how it shapes our practice.

In terms of whether we're going in a direction of all beings getting enlightened—one of my favorite mantras is simply "who knows." And it's not the "who knows" of confusion. It's just the "who knows" of openness. Realizing what we don't know and resting in the not knowing.

I could go on forever, but my first teacher Munindraji really did go on forever. He once gave a three-hour talk on twenty-one kinds of silence. And ever since then I've been very conscious of how long these dharma talks go.

Thank you. It was wonderful just wandering in for lunch over these last three months and seeing all the yogis practicing. It's really inspiring. There's nothing better to do.

There really isn't, which you will discover in another day or two. It is truly fantastic. I have deep appreciation and respect for all your practice, because this is really what the world needs. To bring whatever understanding we develop, whatever peace we develop in ourselves, out into the world—this is the greatest gift.

So thank you.

CHAPTER 36

# Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h06

> *In this rich Q&A session from the three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses fundamental questions about the Buddha's teachings with characteristic clarity and depth. He begins by unpacking the full meaning of dukkha beyond simple 'suffering,' explaining how the Pāli term encompasses unreliability and unsatisfactoriness—qualities present even in pleasant experiences like breathing. Drawing from the suttas, he shares the evocative phrase that things 'have the nature to change, to become otherwise,' highlighting the fundamental instability of all conditioned phenomena.*
>
> *Goldstein offers practical guidance for working with physical pain, emphasizing the counterintuitive approach of relaxing and opening rather than contracting against discomfort. He references the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's instruction to be mindful that 'there is a body,' using whole-body awareness as a stable frame for allowing sensations to unwind naturally. The talk explores the crucial distinction between conceptual and direct experience—how experiencing 'foot' versus actual sensations of pressure and movement directly impacts our understanding of impermanence and anattā (non-self).*
>
> *The session addresses working with persistent thoughts, offering the investigation 'What is a thought?' as a powerful tool for seeing their essentially empty nature. Goldstein shares a recent insight from his own practice: the phrase 'whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away' led him to realize 'therefore, there's nothing to want'—pointing directly to the third noble truth and the heart of liberation. This understanding transforms practice from acquiring states to simply resting in freedom from craving.*

Good to be with you all this evening. Thanks for the many questions. Clearly I'm not going to get to all of them, but they were all really great. Each one of them could be an hour dharma talk, but I'm going to try to compress the answers a bit.

The first question was about dukkha: Where is dukkha found in the breath? This question opens up a lot, namely a deeper understanding of what dukkha means. Usually, and even traditionally, dukkha is translated as suffering. In the Four Noble Truths, the first noble truth is the truth of dukkha, and it's often translated as the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path.

But suffering as an English translation of that word is sometimes confusing, as indicated by this question. How is the breath dukkha? We generally don't experience it as suffering. The Buddha made a very global statement about dukkha. He said all conditioned things are dukkha. What are all conditioned things? Everything. Everything except Nibbana, the unconditioned. So all of our experience the Buddha is encompassing with this term.

If we think of it simply as suffering, it doesn't quite make sense because we have a lot of happy, joyous, pleasant experiences in our lives and we generally don't feel them to be suffering. So what does the Buddha mean when he says all conditioned things are dukkha?

Suffering is one aspect of it. Clearly when we're in pain, either physical pain or emotional pain, or see the suffering of others, we can really see that as suffering. But dukkha also means unreliability—that things are not ultimately reliable or ultimately satisfying precisely because they don't last. In this respect, the insight into impermanence and the insight into dukkha are very intertwined. Things are unreliable, ultimately not satisfying, because they're continually changing.

As a little sidebar, I came across another expression in the suttas that really stood out to me. It was another way of expressing the truth of change, an unusual phrase in English. The Buddha talked about things having the nature to change, to become otherwise. I love that—things always becoming otherwise. For me it highlighted and made more vivid the experience of change. Things change, everybody knows that, and we don't even give it a second thought. But somehow "things continually becoming otherwise" really highlights the basic instability of our experience due to its changing nature.

Going back to the original question: Where is dukkha found in the breath? If we think of it in this second, larger meaning—not simply as suffering but as unreliable, or always becoming otherwise—we can see the dukkha in the breath in several ways.

The breath is always changing, becoming otherwise. For a good part of our lives, maybe breathing is very easeful. But there are situations where people have a breath that's not easeful at all, that's very labored, or there's some disease or illness causing actual suffering in the breath. So there's dukkha there.

And this is not going to come as any surprise to you: the breath is ultimately not satisfying because at a certain point we're going to stop breathing. If we're hoping to take refuge in the breath as a place for ultimate peace or ultimate refuge, it's not going to work, because it is a conditioned phenomenon that comes with certain causes. Our bodies get older, we get sick, they're going to die, the breath stops.

This is one of the key meanings of dukkha, because the Buddha was pointing to a realization of that which is an ultimate refuge, which is not subject to change, which is ultimately reliable. When you read the discourses of the suttas, in many different places the Buddha gives a lot of synonyms for Nibbana. They all imply that's the experience that can be counted on, that is not becoming otherwise, that is reliable, that is the ultimate refuge of peace.

I hope this gives you some sense of how we can understand the Buddha's statement that all conditioned phenomena are dukkha. It's not only suffering; it's that unreliability because of the nature of everything to change, to become otherwise.

The next question was about physical pain. Have you had any experience of that in your time here? Probably. The question: "You have said there was a year of your practice where your body felt like twisted metal. Do you have any advice for how to work with intense unpleasantness in the body which has been going on for some time?"

Given the nature of the body and its tendency to continually become otherwise, it's inevitable for all of us that at different times we're going to experience painful sensations. It's simply part of being alive. There's nobody who escapes that. There's nobody who has only pleasant sensations throughout their lives.

So I had to work with it, and as the question indicated, I've worked with a lot of physical pain over the years at different times. During this one particular period, it was protracted—my body just, as I described it to myself, felt like twisted steel. And it took me a long time to figure out how to work with it skillfully.

Because, as you will probably recognize, especially when there's intense discomfort in the body, what's our usual response to it? We don't like it. We want to get rid of it. There's some kind of aversion. And it almost feels like the normal response to painful feelings. Well, it may be normal, but it's not helpful—because the aversion to the pain, the wanting to get rid of it, actually increases it. The contraction of that aversion, the tightness, the pushing away, just makes everything tighter.

So in a way it's counterintuitive, but the way of being with pain—and there are several different subtleties to this—but generally speaking, it's to remind ourselves, and this takes practice, to relax behind it, to open to it, rather than contract and push it away. That relaxation, that opening, allowing, making space for the sensation.

One way of doing this is in a very focused, narrow way, if there's a particular area of pain in the body. But perhaps an easier way is to really start becoming mindful of the whole body, a whole body awareness. A note that I've used in other contexts but which could be useful here comes from the Satipatthāna Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness,

where the Buddha says, "Be mindful"—and then in the equivalent of quotation marks—"'there is a body,' to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness."

That phrase, "there is a body," I started using a lot in my practice. In sitting, in walking: there is a body. Now, this is not a metaphysical statement. It's not to get involved philosophically—is there a body? Isn't there a body? It's not that. It's much simpler. It's just a way of creating a frame, a large frame: there is a body. So we settle into that whole body awareness.

I found that when I do that, it's much easier to just settle back and be open to whatever sensations, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are arising within the frame. It's that frame—there is a body—which gives us a place of stability to rest in, so that we can feel the unpleasantness without reactivity. Because sometimes if we just dive right into the pain, we get into a kind of tussle with it. But if we give ourselves a larger context, a larger framework—oh, there's a body, and then within that, oh, unpleasant sensations just arising and passing and changing as they do—it makes it much easier to settle into that space of allowing, of openness, of being non-reactive.

As we do this, it's a very interesting process that we begin to understand. In that space of openness and allowing, it's as if we create the space for whatever tensions we've accumulated, or energetic knots, or whatever is causing the pain, to actually unwind. There's a healing process that goes on when we can be softly, gently aware of unpleasant sensations. It's like we're giving them the space to unwind, to disentangle.

Just one example of that: I noticed, very often especially some time ago in my practice, when I'd be busy in the world and then go on retreat, the first few days my shoulders were killing me. Just so much discomfort and pain. Why? Because I had been carrying tension that I didn't even know I was carrying. In the course of our busy lives, we accumulate a lot of tension. It becomes normal to us. We're not even really aware that we're carrying it. At the beginning of the retreat, I'd wonder, why are my shoulders hurting so much? And then I realized—yes, because they were up to my ears. That's exaggerating a little bit. But I noticed that it didn't take long; over a few days of just that allowing space, the shoulders started relaxing, the pain started unwinding. It was a release.

So you understand that creating the space of allowing permits the release of a lot of the tension and pain that's there.

This is another question related to dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. How can observing the changing sensations in my feet while walking convince me that nothing can bring me lasting satisfaction? I've never been looking for satisfaction in my feet.

It's probably a question that has arisen for many of you. What is this all about? Why am I watching my feet?

Well, first to say, we might be looking for satisfaction in our feet when they start hurting. Normally, maybe they're not hurting, and so we're not really looking for much. But that's the kind of obvious thing.

There's a more profound way of understanding what this question is pointing to. And that is a really important level shift in the meditation practice: when the mind goes from experiencing the concept of things to the direct experience of them. This at first may seem obvious, but there are a lot of subtle manifestations of it.

We'll take walking meditation, but it can apply to sitting or to any activity at all. It's very possible to be walking and to be mindful of the movement, but still with a subtle overlay—a subtle overlay of an image of foot or leg as we're moving. And it's almost as if we're feeling the sensations of the movement through that overlay. It can be really subtle. But it would be interesting for you to explore and just see whether you notice that happening.

Why is it so important to see the difference between the concept level and the level of direct experience? When we're experiencing the world through concepts—and the concepts don't have only to do with the body—we're living mostly in the world of concepts. When you look outside and you see a tree or a house or a car, those are all concepts. The eye does not see tree. The eye sees color and form and light and shadow, and then the mind perceives that and creates a concept: tree, or house, or whatever it is.

More intimately, we do that with this mind and body. When we are experiencing the body through the filter of the concept—even of body. Body is a concept. Foot is a concept. Leg is a concept. So when you're walking, you are not feeling your foot, because there is no sensation called foot. What you're experiencing is pressure or hardness or softness or lightness or warmth or coolness. Those are the sensations that are actually being felt. Foot and leg is a thought or an image that you're then overlaying on the bare sensations.

Now here's the critical point. Concepts don't change. We use the same word. Had a foot yesterday, foot today, foot tomorrow. Tree was there yesterday, tree is there today, tomorrow. So even though we may know intellectually that things are always changing, to the degree that we're living and experiencing things through the world of concepts—

which is, I would say, almost all the time, except for experienced meditators—those concepts, which we're taking to be the reality, are camouflaging the truth of change, the experience of change. Whereas when we are feeling the actual sensations, they are changing all the time.

So when we have dropped down into direct experience—whether it's in movement or in sitting, just the actual felt sensations of the body—that's when our mind is really diving deeply into the experience of the truth of change.

There's another implication here that has very strong ramifications for understanding selflessness. As you probably know, it's not hard to understand even conceptually the truth of change or dukkha, but selflessness is really counter-intuitive, and it's that aspect of the teachings that people often have the most questions about. What does that mean?

This going from the world or the level of concept to direct experience directly addresses this understanding of selflessness. When we're walking with that overlay of concept—of foot or leg—it's an easy move from foot or leg to my foot and my leg. I'm the one who owns it, or to whom it belongs. It would be completely natural and normal to be talking in these terms: my arm hurts, or my foot hurts, or whatever. It's very easy to add on the I and mine to the concept, because the concept is not changing.

But I don't think anybody would say "my pressure" or "my lightness," or "I am pressure."

When we're on the level of the actual elements and in the experience of their changing nature, the understanding and realization of selflessness becomes so much more apparent. There's a phrase that I've loved since the beginning of my practice, describing this whole process: *empty phenomena rolling on*—empty of self. It's just different elements of mind and body, all conditioned, meaning they arise when the conditions are present. Conditions change, and the experience changes.

So our whole lives—and it's fine to use conventional language, I'm not suggesting we drop all language of self and other and I—the language is fine. But we don't want to get trapped in the language, reifying it as being reflective of actual experience. Because when we do, when that strong sense of self arises because we're seeing things through concept, that's where a lot of attachment comes. We're attached to my body. We're identified with my body. But as I said, we wouldn't be attached to pressure, tightness, whatever the particular elements are. It's so clearly impersonal. When we're on that

level of direct experience, that's when we begin to see the momentary changing nature of everything that's arising. And this really undercuts the powerful tendency to identify with what's going on as being self.

Is this making sense? It does to me. I'm hoping I'm conveying it in a way that it does to you as well.

Now, identification with sticky thoughts. The question was about working with the stickiest thoughts that show up over and over and freak us out—that was not the exact language in the question, I cleaned it up a little bit. The person wrote, "I'm still in a world of believing them, identifying with them when they arise. What techniques can help cultivate non-belief and non-identification with them?"

This is a really big question in meditation practice: how to cut through our identification with the thinking process, because that identification is the cause of so much suffering in our lives. This is the *dukkha*, the suffering of pain, and the habit is so deeply conditioned in us. Even as we begin to get a sense of the physical elements and constant change, even as we begin to see the impersonality of it—not I, not mine—we so easily fall into "I'm thinking." I'm the one who thinks, these are my thoughts.

One of the most freeing aspects, especially in a long retreat where you have a chance to see this over and over again over extended periods of time, is that we slowly begin to see thoughts really in the same way that we might be with sensations in the body—that they are impersonal. There's a phrase that I first heard my teacher Munindraji use, though I've heard other people use it as well, and it really expresses a better understanding of thought. It says: *the thought is the thinker*. The thought is thinking itself. It's not that the thought belongs to anyone. It's not my thought. The thought arises out of a whole host of conditions—background and upbringing and education. There are a lot of reasons why different thoughts come, but they're all impersonal. They don't belong to me. I am not the thought, even though we generally tend to think we are.

So how can we begin to break this identification? You've probably experimented with a lot of ways yourself. I'll just mention a few things that have been helpful for me. One is basic to the meditation instructions: simply using a mental note. Noting "thinking" or "planning" or "judging" or "fantasizing," whatever it is. Because in the moment of making the note—and the note has to be really soft and gentle, because if you're noting "thinking, thinking, thinking" again and again, that's not mindfulness, that's just increasing aversion. So the note has to be really soft, gentle, accepting, allowing. It's just acknowledging. Noting "thinking." Even "judging," but with a soft tone of voice. Because in the moment of making that mental note—

we are not identified with the thought. That's the power of mindfulness. When we're mindful that we're thinking, and the note is helping us be mindful of it—so the note is a support for mindfulness—in that moment of mindfulness of the thought, we are not identified with it.

And we see more clearly. Again, over and over again, it would be interesting if somehow we could count the number of thoughts we have in a three-month retreat. It would be a big number. But with the noting, we just see over and over again: okay, we're not identified. And we see them coming and going, coming and going, coming and going. They start to lose their hold on us. We're not so seduced by them.

And as you've probably heard in the instructions, it can be particularly helpful if you have certain patterns of thought to give a very specific note—the ones that typically seduce you again and again into becoming lost in them. Planning, or memory, or whatever it is, whatever your top ten are—to give a specific note. This is just the most basic way of being with thoughts.

Another way, which I find even more interesting, particularly when there are a lot of thoughts going through the mind, is simply to ask the question: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying—what is a thought as a phenomenon? Very few people ever ask this question. We are totally seduced and carried away by the storyline of the thoughts, the content of the thoughts. And it's very rare that anybody even thinks of looking directly, investigating: Well, what is a thought?

I find this completely fascinating, because we can investigate right in the middle of having them. So the thoughts are there, and if we remember, "Oh, what is that?" the question inspires us to really look directly at it as it's happening. We see that the thought is little more than nothing. It's just this little ephemeral energetic wisp—something that's hardly there. And when we look directly at it, it becomes so obvious. What is it? As I say, it's little more than nothing.

And yet, when we're unaware of the nature of thought, they completely dominate our lives. Our thoughts run us ragged. Go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced, whatever. Our whole lives, it's like we're slaves to these thoughts. So that's on the one hand. And on the other hand, when we look carefully at the nature of thought, we see there's hardly anything there.

To see this again and again creates an amazing place of greater freedom and greater peace in our lives. Because it's not that the thoughts stop coming, but our relationship to them over time changes dramatically. It's not to say we never get caught—even after many years of practice, we get caught again and again—but much less. Instead of living

in the world of our story, we begin to see: No, these are just thoughts or images arising and passing in the mind. They really can have very little, if any, impact if we're not choosing to invest in them.

There are some thoughts which we will want to invest in. So I'm not saying that thoughts are bad or that we shouldn't be having them. Obviously they're a big part of how we function in the world. But because we don't understand their essentially empty nature, we have a much harder time discerning clearly: "Oh yeah, this thought is helpful, let me act on it. This thought is not helpful, let it just go."

I would really suggest you investigate this realm of experience, because it is so predominant in our lives and has such overwhelming impact. And there is the possibility, through our own investigation, through our own awareness, through a clear seeing of thoughts, to really free up a lot of space within ourselves. So you can definitely use the thought process as a vehicle for investigation, for clarity, and for greater freedom.

One more thing about thoughts—this is just a little meditative suggestion. We all have the experience of sitting with the breath, the body, whatever, and thoughts come, and often we get carried away by them for either a shorter or longer period of time. That's really common. But at a certain point with every thought, we wake up from being lost. For as many times as we're lost, that many times do we awaken from being lost.

But the tendency of most meditators, in the moment of waking up from being lost, is judgment about having been lost.

"Oh, I was lost again. How many times? How long is this going to go on?" And we get into another whole lost-in-thought trend.

Rather than that, if you can remember, in that moment when you awaken from being lost—now you're in it, in it, in it, and then for a certain moment, "Oh, thinking"—in that very moment, delight in the wakefulness rather than judging yourself for having been lost. It will make you much happier because, as I said, as many times as you've been lost, that many times you will awaken. So why not cultivate delight in the wakefulness rather than judgment about having been lost?

Not only does this affect our mood and energize us, it also highlights and clarifies in a very immediate way the difference between delusion and wisdom, between ignorance and awareness. Right in that moment—being lost, lost, lost—that's just ignorance. We're lost in the thought. We are not mindful of what we're thinking. We're completely in the story. That is delusion. In the moment of waking up, that's wakefulness. That's

awareness. That's wisdom. Right there in that moment, we get such a vivid understanding of the difference between the two. And because the difference becomes much clearer, it's easier to access that wisdom space of mind, because we see clearly what it is.

I have found this to be of huge interest not only in formal meditation but just going through the day. It's one of the things that delights me about the practice. I can just be going for a walk around the loop, being as mindful as I can, but not in a forced or intensive way—just walking, going for a walk, trying to be mindful. And I notice, even as I'm feeling my body moving, how many times the mind will slip into a thought train, even if it's just for twenty seconds or a minute. It can be a very light, unobtrusive thought that normally I would just not even pay attention to because it's not problematic. But because I've been practicing what I've just been talking about, it's fascinating to see how in the course of our daily life and activities we're dropping into delusion and out of it, into delusion and out of it, many more times than we realize.

I guess this is a piece of bad news: we're more deluded than we think we are. In a strange way, when I saw that, it delighted me, because it came as a surprise. This is fairly recent in the course of my practice—paying attention to this dropping in and out of being lost, just in moving about. It was a bit shocking to see how often the mind just dropped into the story of whatever it was. Again, it doesn't have to be dramatic. It doesn't even have to be problematic. It's just a totally innocuous thought. But we're lost. We're not aware. We're in delusion. So for me, this has just become a really interesting place to practice.

*Can you give any words of encouragement or advice for practicing through dark times and how to approach practice at such a time?*

First, it's important to understand that both in meditation and in our lives, this is going to happen. We all go through hard, difficult, challenging times. This is just part of life. So the first thing is to realize it's not a mistake and it's not some aberration. It doesn't mean you're a bad person or a bad meditator or anything like that. It's just part of life. Sometimes things are going smoothly and easily, and sometimes really challenging things come up—whether physically, emotionally, psychologically, or in the situation of the world. Sometimes things are really hard.

So how can we practice at those times? Everything I'm about to say can be understood within the frame of: How can I find a place of openness and allowing in those times, so we don't contract and we don't drown in the difficulty?

Then the question is how to do that. Something that is really helpful—and sometimes challenging—is to get very precise about whatever feelings or emotions we're having in the midst of the difficult time, the challenging time.

And it can be a wide range. There could be fear or despair or unhappiness or anxiety—there's a long list of what in Buddhism are called the afflictive emotions, those emotions that cause suffering for us. But in order to come to a place of openness, where we are allowing ourselves to feel them without aversion, without trying to push them away, very often we need to be aware precisely of what it is.

I'll just say as a little footnote to that statement: sometimes if the mindfulness is really strong and the emotion is not overwhelming, the precision about what it is is not needed. We could just use a general term—difficult emotion or difficult feeling. And occasionally that would be enough to disidentify. But more often than not, when the situation is really challenging for us, we need to be specific.

Let me give you a few examples of this. At one time in my practice, for whatever reason, I was having this really strong emotion of sadness. It just felt so challenging. I was noting sadness, sadness, sadness. But the noting didn't seem to help at all, and there didn't seem to be any movement. So I got interested and looked more carefully. What actually am I feeling? And it wasn't sadness—it was unhappiness.

It was interesting to me because one might say they're closely related, but they are really quite different emotions. As soon as I could name it precisely—unhappiness—my mind came into alignment with what was present. And it was the alignment that made the acceptance possible. As long as I was misnaming it, I wasn't able to accept it because I was not aligned with what was actually there. As soon as I noted it correctly—oh, this is unhappiness—there was a kind of energetic uplift through the clarity of the recognition. My entanglement with it got much less because then I could actually be mindful of it.

One word of caution with this, because you've all been sitting a long time and I could just imagine—next time you're sitting and you have some emotion, you spend an hour and a half going through a whole list: is it this, is it this? Do not drive yourself crazy with this. What I'm suggesting is to really work with this investigation at those times when for whatever reason you feel stuck in some emotion, where you feel so entangled with it. That's the time to settle back, try out a few different possibilities, and see if you can land on the right one. If not, let it go and continue with your practice. But there will be times when just that move actually frees up the whole thing.

Another pair that often get confused is anxiety and fear. Again, they could be close, but they are different emotions. If we're misnaming or misperceiving, we may not get in alignment with what's there and find it more difficult to be accepting of it.

So clear recognition is really helpful. That's the question in the dark times: to really see, what actually is going on? And there's another thought related to what I said earlier. This is a shift from a concept—"I'm going through such a hard time"—to simply being mindful of the actual emotion that's present. In the first approach, we're reinforcing the sense of self and drowning in the difficulty. When we go to the direct experience of the emotion, then it's possible to see it without identifying with it. To see: yes, this emotion is arising out of whatever conditions, but it's also a passing phenomenon. It's like a storm cloud passing through the sky. And that allowing, that openness, permits the movement. It allows for the release.

There is something of critical importance in working with challenging emotions, in the dark times. This is an addendum to what I said about clear recognition. Recognition and mindfulness are two different things, because we can recognize what's there—even have the recognition correct, correctly perceiving what's present—but that recognition by itself is not mindfulness. It can support mindfulness, but it's possible to recognize what's there and be with it through a filter of desire or aversion. We could recognize, for example, pleasant vedanā—pleasant feeling, whether in the body or the mind. We recognize that.

But if we are perceiving it through a filter of wanting, of desire, of clinging, that's not mindfulness. And that keeps us entangled. Or if it's unpleasant, aversive, if it's an afflictive emotion—we might recognize accurately what's there, but if we're seeing it through the filter of "I don't like this, I want to get rid of it, I want it to go away," that's not mindfulness. And in fact, that aversion is just going to lock it in.

So we want to use the skill of accurate recognition. What is it that's actually here? But then—and this is a teaching from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a really wonderful Burmese monk whom many of you might know—one of his suggestions in practice is just to frequently ask the question: "What's the attitude in my mind about what I'm experiencing?" So it's not only the recognition, but we're also looking at how we're relating to it. And that is absolutely key. That really begins to hone your understanding and appreciation of what mindfulness means, as opposed to simply being in the present or even accurately recognizing what's there. Mindfulness is something in addition. It is being with whatever it is without the greed, without the clinging, without the aversion, without the identification.

All these pieces have to come together, and over time they become natural. Perhaps as people are beginning their practice, they really have to think of each of these things and work with them. But at a certain point, this becomes the habit of your practice. Still, I think it's worth highlighting, because sometimes it's super subtle.

Just another example. One time I was just sitting—normal, ordinary sitting. I was feeling my breath, nothing special going on at all. And then I remembered U Tejaniya's suggestion with that question. So that question arose in my mind: "What's the attitude in my mind?" And it was just for the breath—nothing even very problematic or dramatic.

It was so interesting. I'm just feeling the breath, and this question arises: "What's the attitude?" Simply by asking that question—not even looking for an answer, just by asking the question—I could feel my mind drop back from a wanting that I didn't even know was there. It was very subtle. You might call it an energetic leaning into the next moment, like wanting the next breath, or maybe some undetected wanting to get more concentrated. Something. There was something extra to simply feeling the breath as it was. And that question effected that release. "What's the attitude?" It was amazing, and it highlighted again some of the subtle nuances or refinements of what mindfulness means. We can think we're being mindful, and still there can be that subtle "I want this, I want more of this, I want less of this." So I think it's worth just playing with it.

There are a lot more questions, but only two minutes left. I just want to share with you one thing that came out of my own fairly recent practice in the last year or two. I may have mentioned this in the P1 if I came for a Q&A during that time, but it really has had a very big impact on my practice, so I'd like to share it with you.

There's one statement or teaching in the texts that comes up again and again. I must have read it a million times. It's a very simple statement. It just says: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." This is basically a statement of the truth of change. But when people really

let it in in a profound way. As the stories go, sometimes people would just hear that phrase and become enlightened. "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." And then—awakening.

I was on a self-retreat, sitting in meditation, and things were going along really smoothly. I was just in the flow, in the flow of empty phenomena rolling on. And then this thought arose: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." But because it came right in the middle of a sitting where I was quite absorbed in the process, it had

greater resonance. It wasn't just an intellectual "oh yes, whatever arises will pass away." It really landed. It was almost like that line was emerging from within the process itself. So it was very powerful.

But then my mind did something unexpected. "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want." I'm speaking particularly with respect to the meditative process—because whatever I might be wanting will also pass away. And it was interesting. Similar to what happened when I asked the question "What's the attitude?" I could feel the mind drop back from any kind of wanting at all.

And there was one more piece to this. I got really interested in the quality of the mind, the nature of the mind free of any wanting. It perhaps lasted only a few moments, but it was very dramatic. "Oh, there's nothing to want." And then experiencing that mind.

What became so vivid was this realization: this is really what our practice is about. What we're practicing is not-wanting. But I know for myself, and from working with thousands of yogis, it's so easy in our practice to get caught up in meditative wanting—we want something, whatever it may be. But this end of wanting is precisely the Third Noble Truth. When the Buddha spoke about the truth of dukkha and the cause of dukkha, which is craving or wanting, the end of dukkha is the end of craving. And then there's the whole path.

If we can remind ourselves right in the midst of our practice, as we're practicing, "There's nothing to want"—everything keeps going on. It's not that things stop happening, but there's no entanglement. We're not being caught by the wanting and then all the actions which proceed from wanting. So what I do now, very often when I'm sitting or at any time, that phrase will come: "Oh, there's nothing to want." And it's always a moment of peace.

I'd like to highlight the very essence of the practice. This is the practice of freedom. It's not the practice of simply developing another conditioned state, however wholesome that state may be. And there are many—the Buddha spoke about developing different qualities, and all of that is fine. We can develop them all and they're all part of the path. But can we do that from a place of understanding rather than from a place of wanting? Do you see the difference?

I find it tremendously inspiring to realize that we can really touch the depth of what the Buddha taught, even if it's just for a few moments at a time. The wanting is going to come back, and we'll get caught again and again. But this gives us a real taste of possibility. It gives us a real taste of freedom.

CHAPTER 37

# Q&A with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · 1h08

> *In this intimate Q&A session during a three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses questions spanning the core concerns of serious practitioners. He begins with his teaching "don't waste your suffering," explaining how investigating the causes of dukkha in our own minds—rather than drowning in rumination or blame—reveals the Four Noble Truths as lived experience rather than philosophy.*
>
> *Goldstein offers a fresh perspective on anattā through the lens of complexity theory and emergent properties, explaining why the sense of self feels so real yet remains "not really real." He describes self as a designation—like "river" for flowing water or "rainbow" for an appearance of conditions—and emphasizes that understanding this deeply allows us to live conventionally while remaining unattached. The discussion extends to wise discernment, where he outlines how the three unwholesome roots (greed, hatred, delusion) and their wholesome counterparts provide a framework for assessing our motivations with honesty.*
>
> *Practical guidance flows throughout: recognizing positive mind states when hindrances are absent, understanding that "liberation through non-clinging" applies equally to pleasant experiences, working skillfully with doubt by recognizing its "wise-sounding voice," and accepting the natural ups and downs of practice. Goldstein closes with reflections on aging and death, offering the Buddha's daily contemplation on impermanence and the liberating recognition: "I am not exempt."*

So just on behalf of the teaching team, I want to say a big thank you to Joseph for being here tonight, and me personally for him choosing my talk night to get a pass for this evening.

Thank you for all of your questions. Just to say there were a lot—there was a veritable blizzard of bits of paper in the basket. I know we're not going to get time to cover all of them tonight. We teachers can try to follow up with some that we don't get to in the morning reflections over the next few days. If some of them feel a bit more urgent, you might bring them to your practice teachers or to Shelly. And some of them were a little more themed around practice in daily life, so we'll save those ones for closer towards the end of the retreat.

I've got a list here of all the questions that came in. A lot of them began with a lot of gratitude for Joseph. So just to save time, I'll read one representative gratitude, and then you can assume that the rest of them had a similar preface. It says, "I wanted to share my deepest gratitude for all you've done to bring the Dharma to the West. If it weren't for you, I would not have encountered these teachings, and they have profoundly changed my life in such a positive way." So that was a pretty common theme.

Okay, ready for the first one? Well, the Four Noble Truths start with suffering, so the first question says: "Dear Joseph, you have said, 'Don't waste your suffering.' Can you please elaborate on what you mean?"

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yes, this is one of my new favorite mantras. It came about really out of my own practice being on retreat and just dealing with the same things that you will deal with. Sometimes it's going really smoothly and sometimes things are coming up—either in the meditation process itself or just things from our life experience and unresolved difficulties where we're still caught in something.

At a certain point in my practice, I really developed a very keen interest in understanding the causes of suffering in my own mind. Because we can't control outer circumstances very much. But we are completely responsible for our own minds. And if there's suffering in the mind, there's something going on that's causing it—which is, of course, the first two noble truths.

What I found interesting is that very often the habits we have when we're facing either mild or even quite intense suffering—very often there's just a habit of drowning in it and ruminating about it and going over and over, not leading anyplace. At other times, there can be a tendency to blame either other people or a situation, and it's their fault that I'm suffering. That's wasting one's suffering. Because as Ajahn Chah once said, that's just suffering that leads to more suffering.

So not wasting the suffering is actually turning the attention inward and taking interest in what's going on in my mind that is the cause of this suffering. And there's always something. It might be we're attached to things being a certain way and they're not the way we like it to be. Or there's resistance to something. Or we're misperceiving something.

So the suggestion is to actually have these times of unease, distress, suffering pique your interest rather than it be a problem. Because I found that some of the most interesting insights come from that really direct investigation into the patterns in the mind in those moments that are the cause of that distress. So it's really transforming.

I don't know if you'll quite be at the point of saying, "Oh good, there's suffering! Let me take a look at it." Well, you can leave off "oh, that's good." But don't leave off "let me take a look at it." Because that's really where the freedom is going to be found.

And it's very impactful, because at that point, the Four Noble Truths are not theoretical. It's not Buddhist philosophy. We're in the midst of it. And we can really begin to develop a deep insight and see the potential for freedom within our own mind. That's what's meant by that: don't waste your suffering.

**Questioner:** So there were a few that are loosely themed around anattā or not-self, and I thought to just read you three or four, and then you can hopefully pick out what strikes you. So one is, "I've been discussing the..."

I've been discussing investigation with my interview teachers. What's the relationship between investigation and active or analytical thinking? Can they coexist in the process of insight? And the second part of that question is: are noting and feeling into the experience enough to get beneath the surface, to dismantle the sense of a separate self and penetrate deep truths like anatta and sunyata?

There were several related questions. One person asked: would you please share some practices for deepening our realization of anatta? Another inquired: what does uprooting greed and aversion have to do with the dissolution of self? For example, isn't just wanting to scratch an itch simply nature? And lastly: if we all share one awareness, why does that awareness only know one individual's nervous system, thoughts, and emotions? It seems this localization has a lot to do with the illusion of a separate self.

I'm too old for four questions in a row! But let me address anything in the terrain of self and not-self.

First, let me frame two general meanings or manifestations of anatta. One, which you're very familiar with, is simply the understanding of no-self—that in the midst of this whole mind-body process, the ongoing flow of mind-body elements, there's no one core unchanging element that is the "I," the self. Really, the word *self* is a designation for the process of change. We can use the word self and all the conventional language of I and you and other. All of that's fine if we're not deluded into thinking it refers to something real in itself, something substantial that's there as the core being of who I am—realizing that this terminology is simply a designation.

I'll give you a simple example I've been using for years, which may illustrate this more clearly. If you're sitting by the side of a river, we use the term "river," and people know what that means. But what actually is a river? The river is the flow of water. We

use the term as a designation for that flow. It's not that "river," as a noun, refers to something in and of itself apart from that flow of water. That's all it is—a designation for something. Self is a designation.

Another example I use is a rainbow. A rainbow appears in the sky. We all delight in it; it's beautiful. But what is a rainbow? It's an appearance when certain conditions come together—light and moisture and air. When the conditions are right, a rainbow appears. But a rainbow is not a thing in itself; it's simply an appearance of certain conditions coming together.

So basically, we're all rainbows. Yes, how sweet! We're an appearance. Joseph is an appearance, a rainbow. The physical elements, all the mental factors, the different states of consciousness—they're all arising in a certain relationship, in a certain pattern, and we call the pattern "Joseph." But then we fall into the delusion of thinking that there's a Joseph somehow separate from this process of impersonal, changing elements.

Recently I was reading a book that highlighted something important for me. Given that self is just a concept, just a designation, why are we so fooled by it? We're fooled by this designation because it has a powerful hold on everybody. We have this strong sense of being someone. The book was actually rather science-minded—I could barely understand it—but a few concepts jumped out at me. It was talking about complexity theory and emergent properties. An emergent property is essentially saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Take a simple example: a car. You put all the parts of the car together—when it's still on the assembly line, all the parts are there, which is really what constitutes the car. But it's not quite a car yet; it doesn't go anyplace, it doesn't move. But you put these elements together in a certain way, and the emergent properties of a car show themselves. We get into it and drive.

So when I read this, I realized that yes, self is an emergent property of these mental and physical elements. If you put all these parts together in a certain way, what emerges is what we call self—relating as separate human beings, our conventional understanding. A light bulb went off for me. *Oh, well that's why it's so seductive*—because there is a certain level of reality to the notion of self as an emergent property.

But as one Tibetan teacher expressed it: yes, the self is real, but not *really* real. I think that captures it beautifully. It is real, and we live our lives in that way of relating. So it's not only important, it's something we all do—just living in that realm. But we think it's really real.

Unlike a car, which many people have disassembled, very few people have taken the time or undertaken the discipline to ask: what are really the constituent parts which together emerge in what we call self, or relate to as self? It's on that deeper level that we begin to truly experience the three characteristics and the Four Noble Truths, because we see all of these different elements momentarily arising and passing, and there's no substantial reality to them.

The beauty of the practice in terms of how we live our lives is this: the more we investigate and explore the basic elements, the constituent parts that make up what we call self, and see their insubstantial, impersonal nature—and here's where the understanding of non-self comes in—the more we can live in the world of emergent reality but not be so attached to it. Because we understand on a deeper level that the processes involved are all impersonal, following their own laws. They're ungovernable.

This "ungovernable" is another word which many people don't realize is also a description of *anattā*. It's ungovernable in the sense that all of the elements are following their own laws, just like there are laws of chemistry or physics. They're following their own laws; they're not subject to our will. I could say, "Joseph, I've decided not to die." This body is following its own laws. It's not subject to my will.

Now, this doesn't mean that things are chaotic. Because when we understand the laws governing how things unfold, then if there's a desired goal or an aspiration, it's not simply to hope for it or wish for it or pray for it—it's to understand the lawful process of what conditions lead to that result. Then we can align ourselves, be in harmony with those conditions.

Everything is an example of this, but sometimes I think of the law of gravity. It's a law of science, and yet we sent a rocket to the moon. How? Because there was an understanding of the laws which determined gravity's holding force and what's needed to overcome it. So it's all lawful, but not under our control. It's not just according to our will. And that's where the wisdom factor is so essential in our lives.

If we want to be happy, if we want to be at peace, if we want to be compassionate and loving, it's not enough just to wish it. You have to come here and sit for six weeks or three months. That's really what we're all doing—coming to a deeper and deeper understanding of what leads to what. Then we can align ourselves with that lawful process.

All of this is just the manifestation of the selfless nature, the impersonal nature. And yet we can relate conventionally in the world, understanding that the sense of self exists as an emergent property. So it's not that we're throwing that out; it's just understanding its place.

The question reads: Can you explain and advise how wise discernment is developed? I'm often confused whether an action is skillful or unskillful for this being, with its limitations and conditions.

This is for me one of the tremendous blessings and gifts of the Buddhist teachings, because if we really were trying to sort all this out in our own minds—I mean, it's hard enough just being with five breaths—but trying to really sort out all of the different mental factors and how they work and how they relate to one another... When you become familiar in some depth with the Buddha's teachings, there's not even any one word to describe it. It's brilliant and profound and comprehensive. It's amazing. We've just been given this gift as a framework for the investigation.

The Buddha laid this out pretty simply, and it's actually part of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Foundations of Mindfulness. One of the meanings of mindfulness, of the word *sati*—as we know, mostly it's translated as mindfulness, but the root meaning of the Pali word has to do with remembering. We could say, yes, it's remembering the present moment, but in the description of *sati*, it's also remembering what is skillful and what is unskillful. This is one of the applications in our practice of *sati*, of mindfulness.

So then how do we discern what's skillful and what's unskillful? The Buddha really simplified it for us. He said there are three wholesome and three unwholesome roots of all skillful and unskillful actions. Greed, hatred, and ignorance are unwholesome—they're unskillful mind states that lead to suffering. Non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or *mettā*, and non-delusion or wisdom are skillful, leading to peace and freedom. So that at least is a beginning way of discerning and assessing the thoughts we're having.

Related to thoughts, but with a slightly different nuance, is really becoming attuned to one's motivations, because we can see these wholesome and unwholesome roots in the motivations behind our actions. It may reveal itself in thought, but the motivation actually, in my experience, seems to come from someplace deeper than a thought. It takes a lot of honesty to really look carefully at one's motivations with discernment and to acknowledge: Is this just greed? Is it an unhealthy desire or clinging or grasping or attachment? Is this coming out of aversion or not wanting or fear or hatred? Is it coming out of confusion or ignorance? Or the opposite—is it motivated by generosity or love or wisdom?

Even just having that very simple framework can be a doorway to this wise discernment, where we're actually seeing what is wholesome and what is unwholesome.

There's a lot of subtlety involved in this, though. I'll give one example, because the Buddha had such a beautiful image. One time I was teaching a retreat at a Trappist monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. It was a very liberal abbot, and they invited me to come and teach meditation. Just before the retreat I was giving, there was some kind of seminar that was more psychologically based. One of the things that had come up in that previous seminar, in dealing with emotion, was the teaching to "honor your anger."

I thought, "Honor your anger?" From the perspective of the Buddhist teaching, I would tweak this a little. It's not so much that we should honor our anger, because anger is an unwholesome mind state. However, we can honor the fact that it's there. We're actually seeing it, taking responsibility for it. We're not pushing it away, not pretending that we're not angry. We're honoring the fact that it's there. But then we want to become mindful of it so as not to be caught by it.

However, we often are caught by it. And this is the image the Buddha used: anger with its poisoned source, anger with its poisoned root and honeyed tip. We're seduced by it very often. Anger is a powerful emotion.

It's like a lot of energy, and we often feel strong when anger is present. And sometimes the anger is telling us something important. Sometimes there's a message in the fact that the anger is arising. Maybe something is really unjust or wrong and needs a response, and our first impulse might be anger. And then we can get caught up by it —"Yes, this is right"—the honeyed tip.

But we could take the message in terms of, "Okay, what's this situation and what needs to be done?" and not get caught in the energy, in the motivation of anger, which is an unwholesome mindset. But that's what I mean about discernment—sometimes we really have to look carefully to see what's what.

Another example of discerning what's wholesome and unwholesome, and I think this is just a super common experience: people very often conflate love and attachment. I've spoken with so many people over the years, and the common refrain is, "Of course if I love somebody I'm going to be attached." Because I think most people have not really looked carefully at these two mindsets, these two emotions. And so they become conflated—a wholesome mind state and an unwholesome mind state enmeshed with one another.

It becomes really interesting to investigate. When you're feeling love, what does that feel like? You're really bringing mindfulness to that emotion. When you're most loving, what's the energy? What's the feeling? In my experience, it's like a generosity of the heart. It's this openness. And what's attachment? It's this contraction. It's holding on.

Then you look at the consequences of the two. What are the consequences of the feeling of love? Usually it's something beautiful. What are the consequences of the feeling of attachment? Fear? Insecurity? Uncertainty? Isn't it strange that we just think they're inextricably woven together? But it's because we have not taken the time, in this very precise way, to discern what's skillful and what's unskillful. So this is a really important part of our practice.

Unless you were born a saint, most likely in our various responses to things—whether it's things within ourselves or to other people or situations—our motives will be mixed. It's very unlikely, again unless you happen to be a saint, that your motives are always one hundred percent pure.

I have so many examples of this. Just one story which some of you may have heard; I tell it over the years. I was on a self-retreat, reading some of the suttas, and I came across a story that I thought would make a great story for Sharon—Sharon Salzberg, my colleague and friend—who was writing a book. I thought, "Oh, that's going to be a great story for Sharon's book." And then the very next thought in my mind was, "No, I want to keep this story for myself." Because for a Dharma teacher, a good story is like gold. "I'm going to keep this to myself."

And then I thought, "No, that's clearly just unwholesome. It's just greed, attachment. Okay, I'll give her the story. But I'll tell her what I went through so she appreciates the fact that I gave her the story."

So my mind was just going back and forth like this, and at a certain point I asked myself, "Joseph, in all of this, where is the purity of motive here?" And I realized it was there in the very first moment—that very first impulse.

This is to say that often we do have mixed motives, and many different kinds of thoughts arise. But if we have this quality of discernment and we're really watching our minds and our motivations, we can see clearly—and then not get judgmental about all the unwholesome thoughts, but simply return to that moment: "Oh yes, that was the wholesome impulse. Just give."

I tell this story because in this discernment, it's really important to be honest about the range of our own motivations. If we're not honest about it, we're not going to see it. And if we don't see it, we may very well be acting on the unwholesome motivations. Do you see how interesting all of this is? It's really quite illuminating of our lives.

A question came in that perhaps ties into this, about skillful mind states on retreat: "Could you please say a bit more about how to practice when the hindrances are absent? So far when it happens—not all that often—I note that they are absent, I enjoy it, and I try not to get attached. Wondering what you suggest."

Two things. First, I would be quite interested and mindful in not simply seeing the absence of the hindrances, but noticing what mind states are present in their absence. It might be calm. It might be concentration. It might be renunciation. In the absence of aversion or anger, there might be feelings of love or peace. Many positive mind states arise when the hindrances are absent.

Why is it important to recognize what these positive mind states are? Because they too are not to be clung to. The positive mind states, as well as the hindrances, call for mindfulness—mindful of peace, mindful of calm. We experience them, but without identifying with them, without holding on to them, without becoming attached. This is the role of mindfulness, but it helps to be very precise about the mind state, because it's easy to fall into simply thinking, "Oh, this feels good," and just hanging out and enjoying it. That's definitely more enjoyable than when the hindrances are present, but attachment to wholesome mind states is no less problematic than attachment to unwholesome ones. We want to develop this capacity. In an expansive sense, this is really the manifestation and development of equanimity. Pleasant, unpleasant—we're just seeing. The mind is non-reactive.

But let me show you how deeply conditioned our assessments of these different mind states can be. Suppose you're not on a silent retreat, but at home, sitting for an hour, and perhaps there were many hindrances or discomfort in the body. You get up and someone asks, "How was your sitting?" "Oh, a terrible sitting. My body hurt, my mind was restless." Or maybe you had a really peaceful sitting, and someone asks, "How was it?" "Oh, great sitting. The mind was calm, quiet."

No. That assessment is completely wrong, because it all depends on how mindful we were of whatever arose. If we had a peaceful sitting but were just immersed in it, attached to it, wanting it to continue, the assessment of that being a good sitting is incorrect. And if we were struggling with hindrances but actually being mindful of them, investigating them—that would be a good sitting, if we want to use such terms.

So again, mindfulness of the states present when the hindrances are absent is really important and often overlooked. We're so grateful to be free of the hindrances for a while that we think, "Let me just sit and enjoy this."

There's one very simple phrase in the suttas that comes up again and again, and it can be your reference point: the Buddha talks about liberation through non-clinging. That's really what you're practicing. There are many tools and techniques, but all of them are in the service of not clinging. It's good to remind yourself what you're actually doing here. It's not to have some special state or experience.

It's to not cling to whatever is arising.

So just to hammer the point home: there's another teaching of the Buddha which is really quite strong. He said that as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. That's a pretty high bar.

We can just watch, whether in our regular meditation or our daily lives—it's almost like we're hardwired. Of course I want what's pleasant, and of course I don't want what's unpleasant. It's so deeply conditioned, and that's why it takes a special circumstance, like a retreat, where you can devote yourself to this much more subtle understanding of what's arising. And we do get moments, sometimes more than moments, when the mind is really equanimous. Pleasant, unpleasant—the mind is non-reactive.

A little mantra that has helped me a lot, because this takes practice, because there's deep conditioning in us: "It's okay to feel the unpleasantness. It's okay to feel it." All the conditioning in our mind says it's not okay. We don't like it. We want to get rid of it. So just as a counterpoint to that habit of mind, it reminds us: if there's pain in the body, can I settle into it? Can I relax into it? Can I just explore what that experience is like? And the same thing with the pleasant—to be able to be with it without the attachment or the wanting it to continue. Then we really get into the profound depths of the practice.

So it's not an insignificant thing that you're doing here. It's really addressing some of our deepest conditioning and the cause of so much suffering in our lives. Because if we're attached to the pleasant and averse to the unpleasant, we live very defensive lives. We're always trying to protect ourselves. We have a little bit of pleasantness and think, "Let me just hold on to that and keep everything unpleasant away." It's not a very fulfilling way to live. But it's challenging. And that's why it takes practice.

Maybe that folds into a couple of questions around the theme of maintaining momentum. One asks: "Have you experienced a steady stream of insight in your fifty years of practice, or have there been dry spells without insight? Can you share some recent

insights?" And the other: "How have you maintained resolve on long retreats? How have you addressed doubt about the effectiveness of practice, especially when it seems so convincing?"

I'll start with that last one, because doubt, of all the hindrances, is the most problematic. With all the others, the mind's in the ballpark with whatever the object is. We may be relating to the experience through the filter of desire or aversion, or the mind's restless and running around. But at least we're in the arena with what's happening. With doubt, we're not even in the arena anymore. We've removed ourselves from the playing field. That's why it's really obstructive. Doubt can really hold back one's practice if we don't learn how to work with it—and we can learn to work with it.

The reason doubt is so seductive, and it can be really seductive, is because it comes in this very wise-sounding voice. This voice in the mind says, "Oh, the practice isn't going well, so maybe I should take a little rest." Or, "These teachers—what do they know?" Or, "This practice, I've been doing it and doing it and I don't seem to be getting anyplace." It's just this wise-sounding voice that seduces us, and we're not recognizing it as doubt.

The miracle cure for doubt is recognizing it when it arrives. "Oh, that's just doubt. That's the doubting mind." In that moment, we're no longer identified with that wise-sounding voice. It's no longer fooling us, and we're seeing it for what it is.

So that's just a preface to the other parts of the question, but I wanted to emphasize it because you do want to keep an eye out. Each one of us may have very specific kinds of doubts. It may be doubt about the practice. It may be doubt about your own ability to do the practice. It would be really helpful, if doubt is one of the hindrances that comes up for you from time to time, to get really precise about the particular doubt that is seductive for you. Become very familiar with it, because then when it arises—oh, there you are. There's doubt. It's really helpful to work with that as a hindrance. And it's very workable once it's clearly seen.

One of the biggest illusions as people begin their practice—and I think you have seen through this by now—is the idea that it's just going to get better and better and better until we're fully enlightened. Sorry, folks. There are just endless ups and downs and ups and downs and flat periods. We're practicing and we think nothing is going on. This is normal. This is how it unfolds.

What we learn over time, and you probably have some inkling of this already, is that even with all the ups and downs, the slope of the curve is going up. From sitting to sitting, or day to day, sometimes the mind is concentrated and clear and we feel great.

Other times it may feel like we've never practiced before. And then the next day or the next sitting, the mind is quite mindful again. After going through these cycles enough times, after many days or years of practice, even though there are still ups and downs, we realize we're in a very different place. The ups and downs are happening on a different level.

One of the things that comes from many years of practice is that we become much more equanimous about all of this. I remember in the early years of my practice, I'd get very upset when things would be going well and then crash—it felt like everything was impossible. I'd get really upset and think, what am I doing wrong? But after experiencing it for years, there's now just a real equanimity. This sitting feels like I never sat before. But I know the next sitting or the next couple of sittings, it's going to pick up again. If you have that understanding that this is the natural course of practice, then you don't get upset by the inevitable ups and downs.

The plateaus can be the most challenging, in a way, because at least with the ups and downs, we're seeing things changing constantly. But I've gone through periods where it just felt like nothing was happening—for days. It wasn't just a sitting or two. It was days and days of just nothing going on. At first, especially the first times I experienced those plateaus, it was really difficult. It was discouraging, full of self-judgment.

But I remember one particular time when I was practicing in India. I was up in the mountains during the summer months, doing a self-retreat and going through one of these dry spells. At a certain point, I gave myself a talking to. I said, Joseph, just sit and walk. Just sit and walk. That's your job. Let the Dharma take care of the rest. It was a kind of surrender to the Dharma. I was going to do my part, and I could sit and I could walk regardless of what was happening. I could just keep going. That simple reframing was tremendously helpful. I just kept sitting and walking, sitting and walking.

I don't remember how long it took, but at a certain point, the energy built up and the momentum built up again, and I came out of the doldrums. This can happen more than once. It's good to recognize that this is part of the path as well. It doesn't have to be a source of doubt or discouragement. It's just part of how things unfold. And there's a way to persevere through it.

And it takes perseverance. This is not an easy thing we're all doing. The Buddha likened it to swimming upstream. We're swimming against not only the current of our own conditioning, which is all very strong, but also against the current of the whole conditioning of our culture. There are so many messages from our culture—"Don't let desire pass you by," "I let nothing stand in the way of my pleasure." The advertisements are full of this kind of messaging. So we're doing something quite opposite to all that. Of

course there are going to be challenges at different times. We're going to come up against different patterns within ourselves. But the beauty is that there's a very clear path and a very clear methodology. If we just keep going, the path unfolds.

So we're coming towards the end. Maybe we can finish with a couple of questions about death. This person writes, "We are about the same age, and I'm thinking more and more about death. How has death's closer proximity affected you and your Dharma practice?" And then a second question: "In learning to live well, it seems like we're learning to die well. Is the deepest crux of this practice to, at our time of death, be able to let go enough so that we won't be born again into this world of suffering?" That sums it up pretty well.

So, first to say that my experience in this aging process—the reality of it has definitely taken on a different vividness. This is just a little personal anecdote. Years ago, my mother was still alive, but she was in her late eighties. And of course, my whole life has been talking about this stuff. So she would be talking about her experience and I would be acknowledging and commiserating and saying that I understand. She would just shake her head and say, "You have no idea." I didn't really appreciate what she meant at the time, but now I do. Because even though we can feel it deeply at any age, and we can really open to the truth of impermanence, at least in my experience, and I think with many others, when we reach a certain age we know it's not going to be that much longer. It really does take on a certain immediacy. For me it has inspired strong motivation to do more practice. For many years in my younger years, I would always do a self-retreat of a month a year—I just built that in. Then in middle age, I thought I would do two months a year. Now in my elderly years, I'm going to do three months a year, because it just feels like the most important thing to do. There is an effect, I think, as we're living into this experience.

But there's another frame that I use for myself and have talked about with other people, which I've found really helpful: we're not dead until we're dead. So in one way, it's all the same. We're in this life process, and of course what we're experiencing may change, but it's the same mind-body process going on until we're dead. Everything we're doing in our practice, in our moment-to-moment experience, is precisely what we want to be happening in the process of dying and the moment of death—to be mindful and not clinging. Everything that you're practicing now is the practice for dying. And that's true up until the last moment. This gives me a lot of energy and inspiration for the practice, to realize that not only is it making our lives freer now in the moment, but it's also the most significant preparation for the dying process. Basically, we just want to stay mindful in the moment of what's happening.

In this stage of life, thoughts of death and dying may come more frequently. For some people, those thoughts can come even quite young.

It just depends on one's particular conditioning. It's really helpful not to get lost in the story our mind is telling us.

There's a Zen story which relates to this. There was a Zen monk living up in the mountains in some cave. He was a great artist, and for whatever reason, he devoted his time to painting this very intricate painting of a tiger. It took him years, and it was just so realistic. After it was all done, as the story goes, he looked at it and became frightened.

One might think, well, that's pretty silly. Yet we are doing the same thing with our thoughts and our fears. All the thoughts we have about dying are painted tigers, because we're actually still alive, still in the moment. We can relate to this moment's experience and even relate to those thoughts, but seeing them as thoughts in the moment—not being pulled into the fearful story or the anxiety story or whatever it may be. That story is a painted tiger.

If we can see that, then even if such thoughts come up—and they might, for different people have different relationships to the idea of dying—it's really helpful to see that they are just thoughts in the moment. And thoughts in the moment are very workable. But if we take them to be the real tiger, if we start believing or getting lost in the content, the storyline, then it's going to be a source of distress and unease.

This whole opening to the truth—the Buddha emphasized this so often. I'll close with this reflection that he offered. This was so important to him that he suggested it be reflected on daily. And I find it so helpful just in the midst of my daily life.

He said: "What has the nature to grow old will grow old. What has the nature to become ill will become ill. What has the nature to die will die. And I am not exempt."

That's the kicker. Because even though intellectually we all know this—it's not some esoteric truth—what has the nature to grow old is going to grow old and grow ill and die. This is the nature of things. This is what's going to happen. But I see it in myself, and I think it's not uncommon: until we're really hit in the face with it, there's this underlying feeling that we are exempt. Or that if we're not exempt, we should be exempt.

I've seen this in myself—as if these things happening are a mistake, as if somehow I had done something differently, they wouldn't happen. That's why the Buddha said this should be a daily reflection. And it really helps me. If I'm going through the day and I

don't feel well, or something hurts, and I begin wondering, "Why did that happen?"—I am not exempt. And it's freeing. It just allows me to relax. Yes, this is just the nature of things. It's really quite opening and supportive of greater ease.

After some practice, you don't even have to do the whole reflection. You could just say: I am not exempt. That sums it up.

So we are not exempt together. And this whole path—I really got inspired just when I walked in here. I saw the whole field with all of you. It's an amazing thing that you're all doing. Having done so many retreats myself, I know it's really rare in this world. And it's essential. It's essential for our own happiness, and it's essential for beginning to share that happiness and peace with everyone else.

It's inspiring, and it's really important.

CHAPTER 38

# Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h00

> *In this engaging Q&A session, Joseph Goldstein addresses fundamental questions about Buddhist practice with characteristic clarity and warmth. He explores what gives practice its purpose, distinguishing between two essential understandings: seeing the impermanent nature of all phenomena through mindfulness, and recognizing the selfless quality of experience. Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he emphasizes that liberation comes not through attaining special states but through non-clinging—when the mind sees impermanence directly, attachment naturally falls away.*
>
> *Goldstein illuminates the teaching on anattā (not-self) through his beloved Big Dipper analogy, showing how the concept of self, like a constellation, is a useful but ultimately empty construction overlaid on the dance of the five aggregates (khandhas). He shares a powerful personal story about working with conflict through the practice of "love no matter what," demonstrating how mettā practice, while operating on the conceptual level, can free us into a selfless space of compassion.*
>
> *The discussion covers practical territory as well: distinguishing aspiration from expectation, finding balance between concentration and relaxation ("focused relaxation"), accepting unpleasant experience through the mantra "it's okay," and investigating consciousness through the "passive voice" method. For those concerned about maintaining practice after retreat, he offers concrete suggestions including guided meditations and the simple commitment to assume the meditation posture daily. Throughout, Goldstein emphasizes that these teachings require no belief—only trust enough to investigate our own experience.*

In case you're wondering who this strange guy is, I'm Joseph and I'm subbing tonight. It's great to join with you. I thought we'd just have an open question period, so if any of you have questions about your practice or the teachings—easy ones.

Last night, Anushka came to talk and brought up a question today. She said I could probably elucidate further. She got to the area of consciousness, form, no form, changing form. What's the point? We're all part of the universe. What's the point?

Is that supposed to be an easy question? I'll try my best.

So just to talk about the underlying question of what's the point, which I think is a really important question. You're putting in all of this effort. This is not exactly a vacation. And so what is the point of it?

There are two different broad ways of understanding the point. One is in the realization and the experience—and this is a lot of what the meditation practice is about, contrary to how we often practice, so I think there's something quite essential here—that the point of the practice is not to be getting something. It's not to be getting a particular mind state, even though there's value, of course, in the cultivation of what's wholesome and the letting go of what's unwholesome. But the key element of our practice is through mindfulness to be seeing the impermanent, momentary nature of things. And so the awareness and the experience of impermanence goes from being an abstraction to being a lived experience.

Now you might say, why is this important? To realize on that level of depth the impermanence of things. It's really very simple: because if we're attached, if we cling to that which changes, we suffer. If we're holding on to something which in its nature is going to change, that's a cause of suffering in our lives—whether it's attachment to the body being a certain way, whether it's attachment to the mind being a certain way.

In one of the groups I was doing yesterday, I offered one frame for understanding how we get caught in difficulties in our practice. You may have had the experience sometimes of just going along, whether it's sitting or walking, just being around, and there's some sense of struggle. Things don't seem to be flowing along easily. We're in some kind of struggle.

So what does struggle mean? Struggle means that something is going on that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. And what is it generally that we don't accept? Things that are unpleasant. And this is pretty hardwired in us. We want what's pleasant, we don't want what's unpleasant. And so as long as we're held by that conditioning, we're continually trying to hold on to things or push things away, and that creates the sense of struggle in our lives.

For those of you who are attached to summer, today was probably a hard day. We can take any example. If you're attached to the body feeling a certain way, then when you're feeling discomfort, there's a sense of struggle. If you're attached to the mind being concentrated or calm, then when the mind is thinking a lot or restless, you're in a sense of struggle.

And the Buddha talked about this in such straightforward language in terms of the practice. Most of you are probably familiar with the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on mindfulness. In that third foundation, the instruction is very simple. It says: be mindful when the mind is concentrated, when it's not concentrated. When the mind is

restless, when it's not restless. When it's this or it's that. It's not saying hold on to anything. It's just saying be mindful of whatever's there, because in that mindfulness we see the impermanence.

So here's a little meditation instruction. The next time you feel like you're in the flow of the awareness of things changing—sometimes we just get into that flow, whether it's in walking or sitting or moving about.

Whenever you feel like you're in the flow of impermanence, really experiencing that, if you can remember, take a look at the quality of the mind when it is experiencing the impermanence of things. The Buddha said—and it's certainly borne out in my experience as well—when the mind is seeing impermanence, it's not clinging. Because if it were clinging, we would be outside of the flow of change. And so we can get a very immediate taste of what that mind is like, the mind of not clinging.

That is the essence of the practice. It's not about having some special experience. It's about not clinging. Often in the texts, one of the phrases the Buddha repeated very frequently is "liberation through non-clinging."

So that's one arena of "what's the point." The point is: through mindfulness we see the changing nature of things. When we see the changing nature of things, we don't cling. When we don't cling, we don't suffer. There's a pretty direct unfolding there.

From another angle—not from the impermanent side, but from the selfless side—whenever we're identified with any part of our experience, whether with the body, with thoughts, with emotions, or with consciousness, with knowing, that identification is already a contraction. We're confining ourselves through the creation of a sense of self in that very narrow slice of experience. My body, my thoughts, my feelings. We've narrowed our experience of the world. And as soon as there's a sense of self, there's a sense of other, with all that that entails.

I'll share with you an example which I've been talking about for the last fifty years. Many of you have probably heard it fifty million times. It's one of my favorite examples: the Big Dipper.

Are you familiar with the constellation, the Big Dipper? You go outside at night, and it's a pretty obvious constellation. Okay, you've been practicing now for five days. So this is your midterm exam: Is there really a Big Dipper up in the sky?

There's no Big Dipper. What's there are points of light, which we know to be stars, in a certain pattern. But the pattern is so seductive that when we look up, immediately the mind goes to seeing "Big Dipper." And there's a certain use to it. As I'm told, the handle

of the Big Dipper points to the North Star, and if you're navigating in the middle of the ocean, you can find north and get where you're going. So the concept has a use, but it is a concept. There's no Big Dipper up there.

One of the very interesting things to notice—and you might make this experiment some night on a clear night—is to go outside and see if it's possible not to see the Big Dipper. Very hard. We've been so conditioned to see in a certain way. But attachment to that way of seeing, whether conscious or unconscious, attachment to that concept of Big Dipper, separates those stars from all the other stars in the sky. So there's the Big Dipper and then there's everything else.

The notion of self is just like Big Dipper. It's a concept. It's a useful concept. We use it to navigate and negotiate the world. But it is just a concept. And as long as we're attached to that concept and that way of perceiving, we have separated ourselves out from the totality.

There's a teaching by Kalu Rinpoche, who was a great Tibetan master. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality; we are that reality. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all."

That really points to a very different way of experiencing our lives. And again, I want to reiterate: it's not that we give up the notion of self in terms of a relative reality that we rely on in many ways. But it's not the ultimate reality of what's going on.

And if we're attached to the concept, then it's a limitation.

This is a long answer, but I'll just finish this. You know, for many years, the teaching on the aggregates—the five aggregates—appeared on almost every page of the Buddhist teachings. It's such a common part of the teaching and way of understanding what is really there, the nature of our experience on the fundamental level. I had been reading it, and my teachers would talk about it, and I just found it the most boring thing in the world. Because it just sounded like Buddhist philosophy to me. The five aggregates, perception, formations—what are they talking about?

It took a long time in my practice. And this particular insight I'd like to share with you, because as you leave here and go back into the world, perhaps staying connected through reading or studying the teachings—the big change for me happened when I realized that these teachings on the aggregates are not about Buddhist philosophy. They're not even particularly a description, although they are in part. They're an instruction. With so many of the teachings, we read them and think, "Oh yes, we under-

stand the Buddha taught this," but we don't necessarily take that teaching—and sometimes it can be a single line—and actually apply it, really investigate it in our experience.

When I started doing that with the aggregates, it became an incredibly rich exploration, because it is a direct way into the understanding of selflessness. The notion of self is a concept, and a useful one, but if we look underneath the concept, what's actually there? It's just the dance of the aggregates. This is quite revolutionary. Everything we took ourselves to be, we're not. That's kind of exciting.

So, how is the metta practice connected to all this? The metta practice works on the relative level of concepts. In that respect, it has a different aim and a different form than the vipassana, because in metta we are relating to the concept of beings. May I be happy, may you be happy, may all beings be happy. It's important to understand that this is the relative level which, as I said, we engage in. We're not throwing out the concept of self. We use it, but understanding that it refers to a concept. In the metta practice, we're using those concepts of self and other and well-wishing for ourselves and others in the service of cultivating and strengthening a wholesome mind state.

I'll tell you a little story, which hopefully is little. I mentioned this, I think, in one of the groups. Some years ago, I was involved in a very conflicted situation, and I was right in the middle of it. There was a lot of tension and stress in the relationships. It was going on for quite a while, and it was very hard to see how we were going to resolve it. At times it got pretty heated.

So I went on retreat, and this was of course coming up in my mind a lot. It was very present, a lot of thinking about it. And most of the thoughts were just justifying my point of view, which was the correct one, of course. I became the lawyer for my own case. Over and over again: this, this, this, this. Don't they see that? But it was obsessive. I couldn't let go of it because the situation was so intense.

At the same time, I happened to be reading a wonderful book called *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle. He's a Jesuit priest in Los Angeles whose mission and work is with the gang kids there, who are living in a horrendous situation. Some of these kids are killing each other, and their backgrounds are horrendous. You see why they've come to that. It's just a lot of dukkha. And Father Boyle is right in the middle of it, working with these kids who are involved in all of this violence.

The book is really a transmission of this principle: love no matter what. Love no matter what. Whatever the kids were doing—it's not that he was condoning their behavior by any means—but he loved them. In Jesuit language, which is not necessarily Buddhist language, love them as God would love them, or as God did love them.

So that phrase went in as I was sitting and going through all my mental obsession: love no matter what. I started applying it to my situation. All of the different people who were doing all these things that I felt were creating so much trouble—love no matter what. No backdoor, no matter what, it doesn't matter.

Something quite extraordinary happened, and unexpected. As that settled, as I could really feel that drop into that space... I would be doing walking meditation. Okay, love no matter what. And then, but— No matter what. No matter what. It didn't take too long until the "no matter what" took hold.

What was so remarkable was contrasting the felt experience of love no matter what as compared to righteousness. The "I'm right" felt like a prison of self and other. As soon as I dropped into a metta space, that particular quality of mind freed me. Even though we're using the concept of self to generate it, it actually brings us into a selfless space of love. So that's how they work together—understanding that we are using concepts, but we're cultivating wholesome states of mind which go beyond them.

---

*Question from a student: I've been playing with the idea of expectations and dropping all expectations. On some level, it seems to make really little sense. But I keep getting stuck on the slippery slope—I think it's also problematic because don't you need to have some expectations of yourself and other people?*

Yes. What's so interesting to me is that on a fundamental level, our minds are all the same. The stories are different. We have different backgrounds and conditioning. But how they're working, the basic working of the mind, is the same in all of us. So I can totally relate to that question, because expectation creeps into our practice and is the cause of a lot of suffering.

It took me a while to discern the difference between aspiration and expectation. Aspiration is totally valuable. You have a certain aspiration in coming here, a certain aspiration in what you want to develop in your life or become in your life. That aspiration sets a direction. And even—this is a word I'm not afraid to use, although some teachers don't like to use it—it's fine to have a goal. The Buddha talked about a goal. There's a path and the path leads someplace. That's not at all a problem. That's the quality of aspiration. We see a possibility, and we aspire to experience it. That sets a direction for us.

Expectation, in the way that I experienced it and am using it now, is when we have an attachment for our experience to be a particular way *now*. That is always going to get us in trouble. Because things arise in every moment when the causes and conditions necessary for their arising are present. And if they're not present yet, they're not going to arise. So if we have expectation, that wanting or grasping at a result, it's going to cause a lot of frustration in the practice. Because as you've probably experienced by now, the practice does not unfold according to our desires. There are a lot of conditions at play. If we have the aspiration and we understand the principles, then we cultivate them and we're going in that direction, but there are lots of ups and downs—difficulty and challenges, then it's easeful, then periods of suffering.

All of that is part of it. The ups and downs, the challenges and ease, the periods of suffering—none of that has to impact our aspiration at all. In fact, we begin to understand that this is all part of the path.

But it does help if we distinguish aspiration from the grasping of expectation, from wanting things to be a certain way right now. I would say just try to see the difference in yourself. You can hear these words, but you really have to investigate for yourself whether you can parse out the difference between those two in how you experience them. I think you would find that it does resolve the question. We can let go of expectation in the unfolding practice and simply be there for whatever arises. The mindfulness itself in each moment is both fulfilling and the path to our aspirations. So the aspirations are being fulfilled even though it may not be according to our moment-to-moment expectations.

*Question: I have a question about concentration practice in relationship to insight practice. My understanding is that somewhere in the Satipatthana it says "mindfulness of the breath to the extent necessary for continuous mindfulness." I feel like I went way too hard with concentration and that brought misery. Now as I'm starting to go the other way, "to the extent necessary" just isn't an answer.*

I'm going to give you a two-word mantra that maybe will be the answer: focused relaxation.

Very often, even the word "concentration" in English carries the connotation of tightening up and scrunching down, concentrating on the object while completely forgetting about the relaxation part. Relaxation means settling back, being at ease. In doing that, the tendency might be to relax to the extent of spacing out. That's why you need to combine the two and really experiment. When you feel like you're getting too tight, see if

you can remember: just relax. The body's breathing anyway. We don't have to make any effort to breathe—breathing is a natural function of the body. Is it possible to settle into the awareness of the body?

Perhaps instead of narrowing the attention on the breath, use the frame of the whole body. Just: there's a body. That becomes our reference point, our primary frame of reference. Within that, we become aware of the body breathing, but it's not necessary to narrow the attention. We can keep the broader perspective and still stay focused on the body breathing. So it's really just playing with those two aspects.

Even in the Buddha's time, there was the famous example of someone who was trying too hard, and the Buddha used the example of tuning a lute. This is not a new problem. To tune it correctly, the strings can't be too tight and they can't be too loose. If it's too tight, we loosen them a bit. If it's too loose, we tighten them a bit. I wouldn't be discouraged by the fact that you're in the process of finding the right balance. As you described it, you're doing exactly what you need to do. You're paying attention. You notice when it's a little too tight, then you relax, make the frame a little bigger, see if that finds the right balance. If it goes too much toward relaxation, bring a little more focus in. I really don't see it as a problem. This is the practice, and that's why it's called practice.

*Question: You once said to me that once you glimpse Nibbana, you're in the fold of the divine. Could you elucidate that?*

I'm always a little... cautious when people refer back to things I've said. Of course I don't remember, but also it would have been unusual because "divine" is not a word I typically use, so it may have been a special moment. However, there's something there, whether I used that particular word or not.

In one way it's very simple. In one description of Nibbana, the Buddha talked about the highest happiness being peace. When we get even a glimpse of that possibility—even before the actual immersion—

in a nibbanic experience, you've probably had moments all along the way of times of greater peace. When the mind has been very agitated and then all of a sudden settles—so just extrapolate that all the way to the highest peace. When we have that taste, it's unforgettable. Not that we're staying in it. That could be just a glimpse, and then we're caught up again in all the patterns of our conditioning. But once we've seen something, we cannot un-see it. That experience is like a gravitational pull. Even as we're caught up in all the stuff of our life, that understanding is in there and it keeps pulling us. So whether you call it divine or peace or the highest happiness—whatever.

*How do you stop resisting the unpleasant?*

That's an important question, because we all do. And this is a deeply conditioned pattern. So I have another little mantra for that. I have mantras for everything. And it came after years of working with the very unpleasant emotion of fear. That was my main afflictive emotion, and sometimes in intensive practice it was just experienced in completely irrational ways. There was nothing fearful happening, but that's just the energy that was coming up in my mind. Very intense. And I'd been working with it for a long time.

There's a very important distinction which is necessary in understanding how not to resist the unpleasant. And that distinction is to see and understand the difference between recognition and mindfulness. Because we can be recognizing something and think we're being mindful, but we're not. We can recognize something through the filter of aversion. That's what I was doing with the fear for years. I recognized it, I was noting it, I was thinking I was being mindful of it, but I wasn't—because I was always wanting it to go away. *I'll note it so you'll go away.* It took me a long time to realize that I was just feeding it.

So at one point, I was doing walking meditation outside in beautiful weather, and something shifted in my mind. That shift was expressed in the thought: *If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay.* And that was the first moment I had really accepted it. All the time before that it was, *I want to get rid of it.*

So "it's okay" became a mantra. Whenever unpleasant things come up, or things I was resisting—*it's okay, it's okay.* It's like how you might be with a child who's going through a difficult time. You don't beat the kid. You don't say, "Oh, you're so stupid for feeling that." No—it's okay. It's okay to feel it, whatever it is, even if it's unpleasant. Sometimes we need to coach ourselves. And as we do, the ability to be okay with the unpleasant gets stronger.

But it's a practice, because the tendency, of course, is we grab onto what's pleasant and we don't like what's unpleasant. That's a pretty deep pattern. So I would just suggest—and again, all of this only has meaning if you experiment to see for yourself whether there's anything valuable in it—but you might try, the next time you're feeling discomfort in the body and you're kind of being mindful but it also feels like you're in a struggle, see what happens if you can remember: *Oh, it's okay. It's okay. Just let me feel it.* You might imagine you're being with a child who is hurting. And that's how we recondition—or decondition—the resistance.

*There are different ways in different traditions to talk about consciousness and how we can actually experience the nature of consciousness, not just as an abstraction, but...*

to really investigate what it is and how we're relating to it and understand it.

Different traditions talk about that in different ways. All of them agree on the importance of not identifying with it. But still, the first step is getting some experience of it, some really clear experience. "Oh, this is what consciousness is. This is what the knowing faculty is."

There are different ways of doing this. One way—and this is very classical, a classical insight in the Vipassana trajectory, one of the first stages of insight in the Unfolding Path—is called purification of view. What this means is that just by being mindful of the breathing, sensations, thoughts, whatever it is, we begin to see that in every moment two things are going on simultaneously. The flow of experience is a pairwise progression of knowing an object. There's the breath and the knowing of it, a sound and the knowing of it, a thought and the knowing of it. All the aspects of our experience—it's always this pair of knowing and object. You want to explore that and see: is that true in your experience?

One way to investigate this—and this is a bit of an odd example—but if you had a corpse in your living room and you pumped the diaphragm with air, there would be a movement, the rising-falling movement. As far as we can tell, there's no knowing there in the corpse. The movement is the same, but it's just the physical. When we're feeling the breath, the rising-falling, we might just remember or investigate: "Oh yes, there's the physical movement and there's something else as well—there's a knowing of it." This highlights the fact that there would be no awareness of anything if consciousness were not there.

We begin to see that consciousness and object are arising and passing together as a pair—arising and passing, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. You might direct some of your attention to investigating the process of your experience in this way, because it can give you a very vivid experience of the nature of knowing and the fact that it is also arising and passing in each moment with the object. So that's one avenue of investigation.

There are times in Vipassana practice, especially in the later stages, where the awareness of the body really disappears, and our experience is that of just knowing. Even all objects can disappear, and it's just knowing. So that again gives you a very vivid experience of the nature of knowing.

There's another method which is called the Goldstein method. This has no authoritative reference in the texts, but it's something I found very helpful. It involves reframing experience in the passive voice.

Usually we're always languaging experience, even if it's not on a conscious level. And usually we're languaging things in the active voice: I'm hearing, I'm thinking, I'm walking, I'm doing this. There's a subject, a verb, and an object. At some point—I'm not even quite sure how it came about—I started framing experience in the passive voice. I was doing walking meditation and it became "movement" or "the sensations of movement being known," rather than "I'm knowing," which creates the sense of self as the knower. In the passive voice, there's no subject. Sensations being known. A sound being known. A thought being known.

Practicing in that way had a remarkable consequence. Going back to the question of expectation, it completely let go of all expectations because I was just there in that process of experiencing things being known. And they were being known without effort, being known spontaneously.

Just now, we'll do a little example. If you move your arm, see if you can get into the frame of the sensations or the movement being known. Do you have to do anything special for them to be known? It's quite miraculous. This is the miracle of consciousness. We're not doing anything. But if we're there, it's just being known, and it's being known spontaneously, and it's being known perfectly and selflessly.

The philosopher Wittgenstein—this is a paraphrase—said something like, "The sense of self is a fluke of grammar."

Because our grammar in language is so powerful, it conditions the way we experience things. Change the grammar a bit and we get a whole different take on what's happening. So I found this passive voice mode very liberating.

The first step is just settling into the ease of it. You walk in again, it takes no effort. You're walking and the sensations are just being known all by themselves. Once you get easeful with the ease of it, then you could ask a very interesting question: Okay, these sensations, this movement is being known—known by what?

That's a really interesting question. It's clear that they're being known. We have no doubt about that. But known by what? This is a way of turning the attention right back to the knowing. And there is something very mysterious about it, because when you look for it, there's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening. So you're really getting right into the depth of understanding the nature of consciousness and the experience of consciousness. One teacher called it "the cognizing power of emptiness." It's a nice phrase. So those are a couple of ways of really honing in on that aspect of our experience, and it's an important one.

*Question: I have a very practical question. When I go home, one of the things I'm nervous about is how am I going to practice without all of these people supporting me? I've been to a retreat before and I told myself, "Oh yeah, I can sit for forty-five minutes, that's easy now. In fact, I'll be nice to myself and just sit for thirty minutes a day." It didn't happen. So how does a person practice every day, or at least almost every day, especially in an area where there isn't really a sangha or something like that? And with all the instructions we've been given, sometimes when I sit I'm like, "Should I practice mindfulness of just the breath, or should I practice mindfulness of all these other things?" And then I just get a little frustrated.*

This is not an unusual question, and it's one of the great challenges. Here, conditions are very supportive for practice—it's what the environment is designed for. And it is really challenging when you go home and there's not this support.

Just a few suggestions. First, note that this is not just your problem. So you don't need to add self-judgment on top of the difficulty, because it's a common problem.

You might try using some guided meditations at home. There are tons of them online and through apps—lots of ways to access them. That's a kind of sangha support that you're bringing into your home, and it's really helpful. You could then do the practice of whatever meditation is being guided, because they're all good. It's not that you'll be making a mistake. Whether you're doing just the breath or more open awareness or mettā, it's all good. Keying into that resource would be very helpful. You could do a fifteen or twenty minute or half-hour guided meditation, and that would also inspire you to keep going until the end of it.

The other suggestion—this was something a yogi from New York described. They had a very hectic, frantic lifestyle and faced the same problem: strong intention to sit every day, but it just got swept away. What they finally came up with was making the intention to simply get into the meditation posture. That's all. Not for any length of time at all. Just get into the posture. Is there anybody who doesn't have time to get into the meditation posture?

If you don't have time to do just that, see me afterwards. We all can do that.

What this person found, and I've seen it in myself, is that the problem is not finding the time. The problem is disengaging. We get so hooked into what we're doing—and we can see it when we're working on the computer or our communication device. It's so hard to disengage, just to let go of it. And that's true of the flow of our daily experiences in general.

What this person found is that once they got into the posture, then it was easier to sit for however long they sat. So sometimes it might have been for a minute or five minutes or ten minutes, and sometimes longer. But it was just the disengaging that was the key element. So you might try that. You make a commitment—but you really have to make the commitment. Not just, "Okay, every day I'm going to at least get into the posture and then see what happens." Between these two approaches—using guided meditations and this commitment to the posture—you might find it helpful.

A question came about the notion of not-self: rather than being the liberation from all suffering, it just seems extremely scary. There was a very gut aversion to it. And along with that, a comment that even though Buddhism is sometimes talked about as not being a religion, there seems to be a surprising amount of faith or trust involved.

So the first question had to do with hearing the teachings about selflessness and no-self and finding that it doesn't feel liberating—it feels scary. "I'm not sure I want to go there." This goes back a little bit to an earlier question. Sometimes people hear "no-self" or "selflessness" and the mind conjures up *poof*—and then we disappear into a cloud of smoke or something. The mind has all kinds of imagination of what it means. And it doesn't mean any of that.

Because again, going back to the Big Dipper—are you familiar with that constellation? When you realize that Big Dipper is a concept, that there's really no Big Dipper there, does anything change in the sky? Nothing changes. It's as it always was, because Big Dipper wasn't there in the first place. It was an overlay, and as I said, it can be a useful overlay.

So when we touch into selflessness, it's not that we're getting rid of anything that's there. We're just seeing things as they are, and still able to use the notion of self. We're not giving up the usefulness of it. When you realize that nothing changes, your whole life continues to go on as it always was. People have the idea of no-self or selflessness as getting rid of something. It's not getting rid of anything, because it's just a concept in the first place.

So then there's another question which takes it a little deeper: if it's not there in the first place, why is the concept so prevalent? Why is it so deeply conditioned? Because there is a felt sense of self, and that's how most people are living their lives. But if we realize that it's just a concept, then we can begin to investigate—where does that felt sense of self come from? Because it's common and we all have it.

When you look carefully, you see that the felt sense of self happens in any moment when there's identification with some aspect of our experience. There's a thought, and if we're relating to it with identification—"my thought," or "I'm thinking"—right there, the felt sense of self has been created. But all it is, is the process of identification. All that's really there is a thought. And the thought comes and goes; the thought is selfless. You follow?

So there's a way of understanding that self is a concept, and therefore we're not getting rid of anything. In understanding it, you don't disappear. Everything is still there, just like the stars in the sky. Realize Big Dipper is a concept, nothing changes. We're just seeing it in a different way. And still able to use the concept.

So the second question was about this: even though Buddhism is sometimes talked about as not being a religion, there still seems to be a lot of faith and trust involved in undertaking the practice. Just as with expectation and aspiration, I think it's helpful to see the difference between trust and belief. Because in the teachings, you don't have to believe anything.

All the teachings are simply an invitation to explore for yourself your own experience—what causes suffering and how to come to the end of that.

The trust part, or what we might call faith, requires only a certain level of confidence. Even on just the intellectual level, some of these teachings seem to make some sense. That's all you need. It's not about belief, and no belief is required.

It's like hearing, "In seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling." Let me check it out. Or, "Metta is a happier state than greed or hatred." Let me check it out.

So there can be trust in the path without the requirement of dogmatic belief.

I think we need to stop. Why don't we just sit for a couple of minutes and let the words settle...

Thank you for stimulating my neural pathways.

CHAPTER 39

# What Is Mindfulness?

Joseph Goldstein · 1h03

> *In this foundational teaching from an insight meditation retreat, Joseph Goldstein offers a nuanced exploration of what mindfulness truly means in the Buddhist tradition. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he moves beyond the popular understanding of mindfulness as simply 'living in the present moment' to reveal its deeper dimensions. Using the memorable metaphor of 'black lab consciousness,' Goldstein distinguishes between mere present-moment awareness and the observing power of mind where we 'know that we're knowing.'*
>
> *Goldstein examines how true mindfulness (sati) requires awareness free from the three unwholesome roots: greed (pulling in), aversion (pushing away), and delusion (running in circles). He shares personal stories from his own practice, including his work with fear under Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, illustrating the crucial difference between recognition and genuine mindfulness. The Buddha's simile of lust as fire, anger as grip, and delusion as net illuminates how these filters distort our perception even when we think we're being aware.*
>
> *Practical techniques are offered, including mental noting and Sayadaw U Tejaniya's instruction to 'check the attitude.' Through the inspiring example of Henry David Thoreau's equanimity in facing death, Goldstein points to the profound freedom available when the mind truly conforms to conditions without resistance. The teaching emphasizes that liberation depends not on what arises in experience, but on how we relate to it—a principle that cuts through endless suffering when properly understood.*

It's quite amazing to come into the hall and see a hundred people sitting in silence. Not a very usual occurrence in our world.

Given the explosion of interest in mindfulness in these last five to ten years, I thought it might be helpful to explore some of the nuances of what mindfulness is and what it isn't, and how mindfulness is really the fundamental methodology of inquiry. It's the fundamental methodology the Buddha proposed on our path of awakening.

The teachings of mindfulness have their root in the teachings of the Buddha. As was mentioned last night, there is one very well-known discourse, the Satipatthana Sutta, The Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It's pretty remarkable to think that a discourse

the Buddha gave over 2600 years ago still has such relevance and power and appropriateness for our lives today. So clearly there's something very essential and very powerful about these teachings.

When I was working on my last book, *Mindfulness*, somebody asked me—I was in the staff dining room here—if I could describe the meaning of mindfulness in just a few words. I thought, well, it's a bit like asking, what is art? Please explain art in a few words. Or what is love? It's not so easy to encapsulate very briefly.

One of the most common descriptions of mindfulness, something you're probably all familiar with, is that being mindful means living in the moment, living in the present—not being continually lost in thoughts of past and future, but actually being here. That's a pretty good starting place. In order to be mindful, we need to be present.

But simply living in the present is not enough. That by itself is not mindfulness.

I've been using an example I call "black lab consciousness." Are you familiar with the Labrador Retrievers, the Black Labradors? They're very friendly, playful dogs, really delightful. When you're playing with them and watching them, they're running around smelling and sniffing and looking, going here and there. They're clearly in the present moment. They're not thinking about the future, they're not thinking about the past—they are engaged in the present. But they don't look very mindful. That may be a projection, a human viewpoint, but I don't really see any evidence of mindfulness there. You can be in the present and fully engaged, but mindfulness means something else is needed.

It's helpful to understand what else is needed in order to be mindful, besides simply being in the present. The importance of this is expressed by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who said, "Live, you say, in the present. Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality."

This is a very profound understanding, because we can be in the present but relate to it in either a superficial way or a very conceptual way. It's not just being in the present that we want—we want reality. We want the connection with what is true.

So then the question becomes: what will take us beyond black lab consciousness? How do we move up the evolutionary scale? What quality of mind do we need to add that will actually lead us to awakening?

An added element, which is a part of mindfulness, could be called the observing power of the mind. The implication of this is that as we're observing different phenomena, we know that we're knowing. A black lab is running around knowing sights and

sounds and smells. It's not unconscious—it's aware of all these things. But as far as we can tell, there's no meta quality to it. It doesn't look like the black lab knows that it's knowing.

When we add the observing power to living in the present—whether we're observing the breath or the body or thoughts or sounds or sights—we're connecting in the present, and we know that we're knowing. This is another dimension to our awareness, to our consciousness, that begins to clarify the meaning of mindfulness.

A very clear way to notice and understand this difference between what I'm calling black lab consciousness—the simple being-present awareness—and the observing power of mind when we know that we're knowing, is to watch the mind and the thoughts arising in it. Begin to see and investigate very clearly for yourselves the difference in your experience between when you have been lost in a thought versus when you're aware of thinking. Has anybody had that experience of being lost in thought? Not uncommon.

Notice what it is like, what the experience is like of being lost in a thought, contrasted with the experience of that moment when we wake up from being lost. The moment of recognizing, "Oh, thinking." Right there. That is a very powerful moment. And it happens endless times a day, so you have many opportunities to really see and explore what the difference in your experience is.

Very often in practice, people will be doing their practice in whatever way—being with the breath, the body, different phenomena—and the mind will get lost in a thought. When people wake up from being lost, they just hurry back to some object, the breath or the body, whatever it is. But if we do that, we're missing the opportunity to really deeply, intimately experience the difference between being lost and being awake.

So I wouldn't rush back. I would take just a few moments—really, but in every moment that you wake up from being lost, which will happen many, many times—highlight that moment and really say, "Oh, this is what wakefulness is. This is what awareness is. In this moment, I'm not lost. I know that I'm knowing. I know that there's thinking." And just contrast it, even if it's a slight looking back retrospectively, contrast that quality of mind with how it had been when you were lost. We just get a very clear sense of the difference. And it's really the difference between ignorance and wisdom, between delusion and wisdom. So it's a powerful moment. Don't overlook it.

And the good news is that for as many times in the day as you get lost, exactly that many times will you awaken, because nobody stays lost forever. We're lost in our thoughts and fantasies, whatever, and at a certain point we wake up. So you actually

have many moments of awakening already during the day. It's just that those moments are often overlooked. My suggestion is don't overlook them. Really connect with that quality because it will illuminate the nature of the aware mind.

I find this particularly obvious, and in a way fascinating, when doing this exercise and paying attention in this way while walking or moving about. The contrast between the simplicity of just the awareness of some body movement—of taking a step—it's so simple and so basic, just taking a step, and it's so easy to be aware of that. And then as you're walking, the experience we've all had is the mind gets caught up in some mind-created world, and for however long—it can be a step or two steps or ten steps—we are lost in this world. We're lost in the movies of our mind. And then we wake up from that, back to another step.

Whenever I notice that, at a certain point it's amusing, because what just happened? Here I was just walking, walking, and all of a sudden I've created a whole mind world which I've inhabited, with all the attendant emotions associated with it. It's all self-created in our minds. And the contrast is just very obvious. Step, step, step, dream world of the mind. Step, step, step, another dream world. It reveals in a very clear and direct way how much of our day is spent dreaming, spent lost in these movies of our minds.

Here on retreat, when you really have nothing else to do—your only job is to pay attention, whatever you're doing—this gets very clear, and it's motivating, because we see how often the mind slips into that deluded state where we don't know what's going on. We're simply lost in the story.

This observing power of mindfulness, where we know that we're knowing, opens up many new areas of investigation and exploration. When we're grounded in this observing power of mind and not lost in the story, not simply running around like a black lab—we're present, we're in the present, but we know that we're knowing, we're aware of what's arising—we can begin to explore things in a whole different way, on a whole different level.

One of my favorite places of investigation revolves around a very simple question. If you hold this question in a meaningful way, it will change your life, hopefully for the better. The question is: What is a thought?

We have all these thoughts all day long going through, thoughts or pictures, images. Mostly we are obsessed with the content of the thought, with what the thought is saying, with the story of it. That's where we're involved and caught up, what we're reactive to or motivated by. It's all about the content of the thought. What I'm suggesting is not that.

I mean, that has its own value, to be aware of the content. But what I'm suggesting is something different. It's not what is the thought saying—it's asking the question in the time of thinking. So it's a direct exploration. It's not conceptual. When we're thinking, when thoughts are arising in the mind, we ask the question or hold the question: well, what is a thought? And then we're looking directly at it.

It's revelatory, because when we look at the nature of thought—not its story, not the content—when we look at the nature of thought, we see that as a phenomenon, it's little more than nothing. It's just like that. It's so ephemeral and so insubstantial.

And what is so amazing in our lives, through seeing this, is realizing that when we're unaware that we're thinking, thoughts have tremendous power in our lives. Thoughts are running our lives. Go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced, whatever. It's like we're the slaves of our thoughts. These are the little dictators of the mind. Thoughts have so much power in our lives when we're unaware of them. And when we are aware of thought as thought, we see that there's nothing much there.

This is tremendously liberating—we come out from the dominion of our thought conditioning. Do you see the potential here? It's so freeing.

And of course we get caught. This is a very long established pattern, being lost in our thoughts, not seeing them clearly. So it's not that by seeing this once, all of a sudden we're going to be free of being captivated by the thought process. But we see it once, we see it twice, we keep on looking in this way. And slowly our understanding is transformed, and thoughts no longer have the power that we have given them for so long.

In that situation, we're then free to choose which thoughts are helpful, which are skillful, which are going to be ennobling for us—and which thoughts are not, which thoughts are just the cause of suffering. And we're more easily able to let them go because we understand and know, not intellectually, we know because we've seen it ourselves, that thought as thought is really empty. There's not much there.

So this is just one small example with huge ramifications of the power of observation, of this kind of knowing. Hopefully you can begin to get a sense that this is not a trivial undertaking. We're really working at understanding ourselves and our minds and our hearts in a way that transforms how we live.

So we can say that being mindful includes being in the present. We definitely need that, but it's not enough. And mindfulness, being mindful, includes this quality, what I've been calling the observing power of the mind, where we know that we're knowing, we know what's arising—like a thought or anything else. It's that meta knowing. We know that we're knowing.

But even this—living in the present and this observing power of mind—is still not necessarily being mindful. I hope you see that mindfulness is not necessarily a simple thing. There are a lot of nuances to really understanding what makes it such a powerful quality of mind.

The reason that this observing power is also not enough to really be mindful is that very often we are in the present and we are observing what's happening, so we know that we're knowing, but we may be knowing through all kinds of mental filters. It's like we're wearing colored glasses and we're seeing whatever the object is through that particular filter. We might be experiencing or observing our experience through the filter of greed, of wanting. So we're in the present, and we know what the object is, and we're observing it—but there's also this wanting or greed in the mind. Or there might be aversion or resistance to what's there. Maybe it's unpleasant, and we're observing it but through the filter of aversion. Or through the filter of delusion, where we're kind of there but it's not really clear.

The Buddha gave a few very apt similes for these three filters. Sometimes when the Buddha uses examples or similes, I find that often I will read them and think, "Oh yes, that resonates." But I don't necessarily take the simile in and look to see how it describes my own experience. So what I suggest, as I read the similes for these three states—they're very apt—is that you really see how they are expressive in your own experience.

of these states, because then it helps us to recognize them more easily.

So this is the Buddha's description. He said: "There's no fire like lust, no grip like anger, no net like delusion." Three very simple images. The next time you happen to be consumed by or overwhelmed by lust, if you can remember this, really look to see—does this make sense? Is this like a fire in the mind? And my experience over many years of watching that and many other similar mind states confirms that it is like a fire, like a burning. Or the grip of anger—when there's strong anger in the mind, doesn't it feel like we are gripped? Or the net, everything covered by a net of delusion.

The problem is, as we try to move to this more refined understanding of mindfulness—which is the observing power of mind free of greed, hatred, and delusion—that really gets to the heart of the quality and the purity of mindfulness. We're with experience, observing experience without those particular filters. The difficulty is that these filters of greed and hatred and delusion, which the Buddha called the three unwholesome roots, are the qualities in the mind out of which all other unwholesome mind states

arise. They're the fundamental qualities. And the challenge with this greed, aversion, or delusion is that they're so deeply conditioned, and for so long, that they're often unconscious. We don't even know that they're there.

I'll give you an example. This is just one example of countless ones, but it has stuck in my mind. It was an experience I had in Burma when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. I had been there for a month or so and my practice was deepening. I was just with the flow of changing experience. My body was getting more open, with an easier flow of energy sensations. But there was this one knot right in my neck. So I'd be just being mindful of all this, and then my mind would go to that sensation and be with it as best I could.

Then when I went to report on my experience to Sayadaw U Pandita, he said, "You know, it all seems to be going well—the body's open, the flow of sensations—but there's this one block, this energy block." And he got on my case for calling it a block. Because I thought I was describing it objectively. Okay, there's this energy flow, so there's an energy block. But just in the use of that term, I was loading the experience with aversion. Block—get rid of it. Block—open it. Block—do something about it. Just in the word itself, and I had had no idea that I was relating to that experience with aversion. I thought I was just seeing it clearly. "Oh, this is a block." Do you see how subtle it can be? Just our interpretations of experience and the language we use to describe what's happening—we need to be very watchful. Do the words themselves convey wanting or aversion or delusion?

So here's another way of tuning in to whether these filters are present or not. This description is from a contemporary teacher—I can't remember who described it this way, but I thought it was quite vivid. They said: greed in the mind is pulling in; we want. Aversion in the mind is pushing away; we don't want. Delusion in the mind is running around in circles.

So if the terms greed and aversion and delusion are somehow too abstract in terms of noticing whether they're present or not, you might try these terms instead. Is there a pulling into experience? Is there a pushing away? Are we just going around really not knowing what's happening? Those are the manifestations of greed, hatred, and delusion: pulling in, pushing away, running around in circles.

According to some schools of Buddhist psychology, and very much part of this particular tradition, mindfulness as a quality of mind is considered to be always wholesome. So if mindfulness is present, that means the mind is in a wholesome state. Even if we're

being mindful of aversion or greed or wanting, it's actually very interesting to observe—and this is getting into a little more refinement, which, as the retreat goes on, you may be able to tune into.

In the moment of being mindful of anger, we're not angry. There's been that moment of disidentification with the anger which makes the mindfulness possible. This shows what you might call the purifying power of mindfulness. It doesn't exclude all these other states from being in the field of our awareness, but mindfulness changes our relationship to those states. And that's really what's freeing.

So mindfulness—now we're coming down to the fullness of its definition—is being in the present. It is this observing power of mind that knows that it's knowing, whatever the object is. And we're observing it or being with it without greed, without pulling in, without aversion, without pushing away, without delusion, without just running around in circles.

I want to give two examples of this. For those of you who have sat many retreats, these stories will be very familiar because I've been talking about them for the last thirty years. But somehow they seem as apt today as they did thirty years ago. I think they highlight just what I'm talking about.

As many of you know, one of the major afflictive emotions or defilements that I have seen in my mind over many years—I would say the predominant negative emotion—has been fear. At times very strong, particularly earlier on in my practice. It wasn't fear about anything in particular. It was just a conditioned energy, and sometimes it was completely irrational. There were times when it was so intense that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It doesn't make any sense. It's not rational. But that energy, for whatever reason, was hugely strong.

So I was working with it a lot—fear, fear, fear, fear, fear. In working with fear, it highlighted a very important distinction, one that is often missed. There's a lot of confusion between these two aspects: the distinction between recognition and mindfulness. Very often we think that if we recognize what's there, we are being mindful. But recognition by itself doesn't take into account the filters through which we're looking.

All that time I was noting fear, fear, fear, fear, it was always with the energy of wanting it to go away. But because I was recognizing it, I thought I was being mindful. This went on for years. It was a strong pattern—not continuous, of course, but it would come up very often.

Then finally, I was doing walking meditation just outside in the spring, and something shifted. All of a sudden something shifted, and the shift was expressed in the thought: if this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay. "It's okay" became a magic mantra for me, because that phrase represented the shift from seeing the fear through the filter of aversion and wanting to push it away to seeing the fear with acceptance. That was really the first moment of mindfulness. In all those years of practice.

Do you see the difference between recognition and mindfulness, and how we can recognize something but it's not necessarily yet being mindful? We have to look at what filters are in the mind.

I want to read another example, and again many of you will be familiar with this, but it's one of my very favorite examples of an extraordinary mind of mindfulness and equanimity in the face of a major challenge. It's a story I read about the death of Henry David Thoreau, who died quite young. He was forty-four and he died of tuberculosis, a very challenging illness. What was written was by a friend of his:

"Henry was never affected, never reached by his illness. Very often I've heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever. He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health—the mind always conforming to the condition of the body. The thought of death, he said, could not begin to trouble him."

That line: "There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health. The mind always conforming to the condition of the body." Isn't that quite amazing? Somebody who's basically dying of a severe, painful illness—

But with the mind that is mindful, that is aware of what's arising without pulling in or pushing away or delusion, the awareness, you could say, conforms to or simply embraces or opens to whatever the condition is. It's often, or certainly in this situation, it may be unpleasant, but with mindfulness, unpleasant experience does not condition aversion. With mindfulness. Mostly it does. Our conditioning is that when something is painful, we don't like it, we want to push it away.

So mindfulness is radical. Mindfulness is saying there's another whole way of being with some of the most challenging times of our lives, including the dying process. Can we be mindful in the way that Thoreau was? It's pretty remarkable.

So this is what we're practicing, being on retreat in somewhat less trying circumstances than Thoreau was in at that time. But you'll have plenty of opportunities to observe the mind feeling pain, feeling discomfort, whether it's in the body or the mind. Check. Really ask yourself, am I being mindful of this—which implies that openness,

that spaciousness, that acceptance—or because it's unpleasant, am I pushing it away? And this will take practice. It takes a lot of practice. But can you get a sense of the potential for freedom here? When our mind does, at least to some extent, even if it's not perfect, but at least to some extent can open to and accept, be mindful of whatever's arising, pleasant or unpleasant—tremendous, tremendous freedom.

So just the last little piece on Thoreau. Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves. When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, aunt." That's a wonderful mind.

One indication that we're in that space of recognition without mindfulness—when we know, we recognize what's there, but we're not being mindful—one indication of that is a sense of struggle. If you're sitting or walking or going through the day, I'm sure you're familiar with the feeling of just things not feeling quite right, a feeling that there's struggling going on of some kind, whether minimal or some big struggle.

Usually we just get caught up in the struggle and then maybe self-judgment about it—"I'm not doing this right" or "it's not working," whatever. Instead, you can take those times of struggle, whenever they arise, as feedback. Struggle actually is a very useful message to us. It's really like a mindfulness bell because it's a very obvious experience.

When we are in a struggle and we see it as feedback rather than simply being lost in the difficulty of it, what does struggle mean? It only means one thing. It means something is arising that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. It's very simple. If you're feeling discomfort in the body and just struggling, take that as a signal: "Oh, this means that the mind is pushing away, that it's not accepting the experience of this unpleasantness." So it's waking us up.

Another example of this, which again can happen very often in practice for many people: there will be many times when your mind does not feel very concentrated. Maybe a lot of thoughts, just a run of thoughts. Maybe you're getting lost a lot. And I know from my own experience that when this happens, there's often a feeling of frustration, of disappointment, of self-judgment, of evaluation of my practice, all of that—"This is terrible, it's not working, I'm just lost in thought all the time."

In that sense of struggle, at one point I saw the struggle, the energetic struggle, and realized what's happening is that I am not accepting the fact that the mind is thinking. I didn't like the fact that it was thinking so much. As soon as I saw that, it was like, "Oh,

thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking." That's what was happening. When I stopped fighting with it or judging it or struggling with it, then the thoughts ran their course and the mind settled back down again. Practice went on.

So what was the difference? A very simple move from resistance or not liking to acceptance—to say, "Yes, this is what's happening now. Lots of thinking." Do you see how simple this can be? My first teacher, Munindraji, had a very good phrase for practice. He said, "It's simple but not easy." It's not easy because of the depth and power of our conditioning, but it's not complicated.

It's really very simple. And so that's why we simply practice. And as we practice, it gets easier.

So the question, one of the questions for us, is how do we move from black lab consciousness to the observing power of the mind to mindfulness? How is that move accomplished?

There are a few very simple techniques which you can play with, experiment with, see which are useful for you in this trajectory. One tool that many people find helpful is the tool or the technique of mental noting, where we're with our experience and we're just putting a very soft mental label on what's happening. So, for example, you might be sitting and noting "in, out, in, out" with the breath. "Hearing, hearing, thinking, in, out. Pain, tightness, in, out." Just like that. Moment after moment, we're just putting a very soft mental note on the experience.

This helps to focus the attention, to bring some clarity to what it is that we're observing. It's a check on whether we're actually connecting with the object or not. And it also serves another purpose because the tone of the note will very often reveal the quality of the observing mind. Even if we may miss those filters of aversion or wanting, because they may be too subtle for us to pick up, the tone of the mental note in our minds is more obvious.

So if you're sitting and noting, "thinking, thinking, thinking, THINKING" — okay, that's a little sign. That is not exactly acceptance. And what's so amazing, and this is really quite an interesting aspect of the practice that would be fun for you to play with, is to see how by simply changing the tone of voice in the note, it changes our mind state. It's a very simple and effective way to move from resistance or aversion or greed to mindfulness. So instead of "thinking, thinking, THINKING," we change the tone: "thinking... thinking... thinking." Just there, just in that moment, the mind settles back into openness, into receptivity.

This tool of noting can be used very effectively for continuity of mindfulness, for really seeing what the various attitudes in the mind are. I would encourage all of you to at least experiment with this. Some meditators find this technique of noting super helpful and can do it all day. They just spend the whole day, moment after moment, noting what's arising very softly, very easily. For other people, that may seem too daunting or it doesn't so much resonate as a continuous practice. But I would really encourage you to at least play with it for periods of time so that it becomes a tool in your toolbox. It doesn't mean that you have to use it all the time, but there will be times in your practice where this tool of noting is hugely helpful.

When you're caught up in some big storm and it's very hard to find some stability or balance in the midst of it, the tool of noting can be a huge stabilizer. Even if you were just noting "storm... storm... storm." In every moment of that note, the mind is being mindful. It's in balance. So again, I would just encourage you to experiment with it as much or as little as you like, but become familiar with the potential of it. And then you can use it as needed.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who has taught in this country in these last few years, takes an approach that is very open and spacious and doesn't particularly use things like noting or even necessarily using the breath as an anchor. What he emphasizes, and which can be incorporated into the practice we're doing, is something he suggests doing very often. He says, "Check the attitude in the mind."

This speaks to that point of noticing the filters. What I call filters, he's calling attitudes. Is there the attitude of wanting or resistance, pushing away, or fear, or whatever it may be? So when he says "check the attitude," it's really reminding us that even as we're connecting with different elements of experience like the breath or sensations or sounds, that by itself is not enough. We need to check to see if we're experiencing those things through a filter or not. When he says "check the attitude," that's just a way of looking into the mind and seeing, okay, is there something else here?

I'll give you an example of how I used this, and it was quite startling to me. I had heard this instruction from him, and I was actually in the hall here, just sitting, just feeling my breath. It was just in, out, in, out. Very simple, I was just feeling my breath. And then I remembered, came to my side, the instruction: check the attitude. So then I looked — oh, what's the attitude here?

Much to my surprise, when I did that... actually, what happened was so interesting. Just by having that thought come to mind — oh, check the attitude — just in the moment of having that thought, I could feel the mind settle back from a leaning forward, mentally and energetically, that I didn't even know was going on.

I thought I was just with the breath. It was so simple, and I've done it for forty-five years. But—oh, check the attitude.

And in that moment of settling back, which happened by itself, I realized that even as I was watching the breath in this very simple way, there was a subtle wanting. It was like an "in-order-to" mind. I'm with the breath in order to become concentrated, in order to settle, in order to accomplish something or get something. That "in order to" is just another aspect of the wanting mind.

And in that simple statement—check the attitude—and settling back, that fell away, and I saw what mindfulness really was. Just feeling the breath, the sensation of the breath exactly as it presented itself, without wanting, without leaning into, without expectation, without "in order to."

So there's one principle of meditation that, if you really take in and embody, will save you endless amounts of suffering. Ready?

In the meditation practice, what's important is not what it is that's arising. What's important is how we're relating to it.

We're not practicing to have particular experiences in vipassana practice, in insight practice. We're practicing a certain relationship to what's arising. That's what we want to really be paying attention to. And this is everything I've been talking about. Mindfulness means relating to experience without those filters of wanting or expectation or resistance or aversion.

So this is our practice. You're not sitting and thinking, "Oh, if only my mind would become like this or that, or have this experience." Can we just settle back in a really relaxed way? The body breathes by itself; you don't have to make any effort to breathe. Just sit back and let the body breathe. And check the attitude. Are you there in the simplicity of it, or is there "I'm doing this in order for something to happen"? Or we're feeling some discomfort in the body. Can we be light with it? You know, as much perfect comfort as perfect disease and perfect health. Or is there resistance to discomfort? The discomfort's not the problem. It's all how we're relating to what's arising.

Is this clear? This is a fundamental principle of meditation, and one that people hear very often and just as often forget. Because the energy of our consumer culture has infiltrated into how we do the practice, in terms of wanting and getting. And this is about something else entirely. This is about freedom.

I'll give another example of the liberating power of mindfulness. It works in so many interesting ways, and sometimes it's so simple, what will unhook us from suffering.

One of the common tendencies in the mind, which I'm sure you've noticed, is just the tendency to judge and have comments about everything. I saw this in particular—I've been on retreat many times here—and I noticed that every time I went into the dining room at mealtime, my mind had a comment about everyone. What they were wearing, how much food they took, how mindful I thought they were being—just everybody that came into my view. It was ridiculous. Totally ridiculous. And yet this is what the mind was doing.

After being caught in it for a long time—this pattern was very strong—I just began to investigate: well, what is going on here? And then at a certain point, I connected with the basic teaching of the Buddha, which I had not applied in this situation.

I just started noting "seeing." As soon as I would walk into the dining room, from the very first step in, that's all I would note. Seeing, seeing, seeing. I'd get my food—seeing, seeing. Sit down at the table—seeing. When I became mindful of the fact that I was seeing, the judgments completely disappeared.

All of those judgments and comments were fueled, came into being, or were encouraged by unmindful seeing. My eyes would land on somebody, and I wasn't mindful that I was seeing, and then the whole proliferation of thought and judgment and concept would arise. All because I wasn't noting—oh, seeing, seeing.

It was that simple.

As soon as I brought it back to the level of bare attention, of just the bare sense impression and having mindfulness right there at the point of contact, all that mental proliferation fell away.

So again, it's not that it took any great effort. It just took understanding. It took a little bit of investigation. What's the cause of all these judgments? Oh, it's because I'm seeing and not being mindful. I hope you get a sense that this is a very powerful cutting-through quality of mind. All of the stories and difficulties and dramas that we get caught up in—there is a way through it all. There is really a way to find freedom in the midst of it.

I'm about halfway through the material, but I'm going to spare you, because one of my conditionings comes from my teachers. My first teacher, Munindraji—this was in my first years of practice in India—we were sitting on the open roof of the Burmese Vihara in Bodh Gaya, which at that time had very few Westerners. Back in the late sixties, maybe there were six or seven of us practicing with him there. He gave a three-hour talk on the twenty-one kinds of silence. Even now it would be a huge challenge, but

then I was a beginning yogi. After an hour, an hour and a half, I really wanted to throw him off the roof. Okay, enough already. So I'm very sensitive to dharma talks and time. We'll continue the rest of this in the days to come.

I'll end with a teaching by the Tibetan master Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, because it captures what is so important for us as we enter into retreat and engage with the practice. He said:

"The potential for realization, for freedom, is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself."

The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you." This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you.

This is, for me, the great inspiring message of the teachings. It's not about belief and it's not about blind faith. It's about each one of us walking on this journey of understanding. And there is a way to do it. There is a methodology that has been practiced for thousands of years. That can be the feeling—and even at times the joy—you bring into the practice as you walk on the path.

CHAPTER 40

# Mettā Meditation

Joseph Goldstein · 1h07

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein offers comprehensive guidance on mettā (loving-kindness) meditation, illuminating its many dimensions through poetry and practical instruction. He shares evocative poems from Naomi Shihab Nye, Hafiz, Montaigne, and Galway Kinnell that capture different shades of mettā—from a father's tender care for his sleeping child to the sun's unconditional giving. These images reveal mettā as a selfless quality of wishing well without expectation, a love that "lights the whole sky."*
>
> *Goldstein explains the three traditional components of mettā practice: holding a clear perception of the recipient, using supportive phrases as a "mantra of loving-kindness," and connecting with the actual feeling of goodwill. He encourages practitioners to find their own doorway into the practice based on their natural inclinations—whether through visualization, phrase repetition, or direct connection with the feeling. Drawing from his own extensive practice, he shares a creative approach of establishing a "field of mettā" and inviting various beings to walk through it, rather than actively directing phrases outward.*
>
> *The talk addresses common challenges, including working with difficult people and the distinction between mettā directed toward suffering (which becomes karuṇā or compassion) and its near enemy of sorrow. Goldstein emphasizes adapting phrases to be appropriate for each situation and relationship, noting that even for those who have caused great harm, we can wish "may you be free of hatred." Throughout, he encourages experimentation and creativity, reminding practitioners that this practice gradually transforms how we relate to all beings—becoming not just something we do, but who we are.*

This afternoon I'd like to continue the discussion and practice of the mettā meditation.

As Jill introduced it yesterday, and just as a reminder, it's really a very simple quality of wishing well for people. The most simple expression of it is "may you be happy." And it's not wanting anything back, it's not in exchange for anything. It's just the development of that capacity for well-wishing.

And it has a lot of different nuances in terms of the feeling. Fifty shades of mettā. So, lest you be taken down the wrong path, I'd like to read a few poems which express some of these different aspects of it, different ways we can manifest this feeling. And then we'll get into the practice a little bit and talk about some different styles or ways of cultivating this quality.

The first poem is called "Shoulders" and it's by the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. I don't know if you're familiar with her—she's a wonderful poet. This is what she wrote:

*A man crosses the street in the rain, stepping gently, looking two times north and south because his son is asleep on his shoulder. No car must splash him. No car drive too near to his shadow. This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo, but he's not marked. Nowhere does his jacket say fragile, handle with care. His ear fills up with breathing. He hears the hum of a boy's dream deep inside him. We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to do what he's doing with one another. The road will only be wide and the rain will never stop falling.*

It's just such a beautiful image—a father carrying his son on his shoulders across the road with that care. "We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to do what he's doing with one another." Sometimes just simple images can evoke the quality of mettā within us. Either a poem or an image of someone is a way of calling forth that feeling within us.

This next one is an informal rendition of a poem by the Persian poet Hafez, created by Daniel Ladinsky. The title of it is "The Sun Never Says":

*Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth, "You owe me." Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole sky.*

That's the quality of mettā. It's never a quality of "I love you and you owe me for this" or "I want something in return." It's just like the sun shining on the earth. It's that quality of radiating the felt wish, "may you be happy."

I love the practice and the discussion of this because it's about a feeling that is at the same time incredibly simple—it's not complicated—and so profound in terms of how it affects how we are in the world.

This last one is from the French essayist Montaigne. He's describing a platonic relationship he had, the deepest friendship of his life, and it was a profound relationship for him. The way he expressed it, I think, captures just another shade of mettā:

*In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me, I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence.*

To me, that just captures the completely selfless quality of mettā—that it's really about the happiness of the other person. That's what we're wishing for. That last line: if that other person's absence is pleasant or useful to them, that gives me more happiness than his presence would be for me. Do you see the beauty of that?

It's really selfless. We're not in it for what we're getting.

The last reading I want to share is a wonderful poem by Galway Kinnell called "Saint Francis and the Sow." This is just part of the poem, the first stanza:

*The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness. To put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing.*

Really, in our metta practice, that's what we're doing. We're reteaching a thing—whether it's ourselves or other people—we're reteaching each one of us its loveliness. That's the power of metta and the effect of metta: until it flowers again from within of self-blessing.

So all of these images capture different aspects of metta: the father carrying his son with tremendous care across the road; the understanding that the sun shines on all of us without any expectation, no "I owe you" or "you owe me"; Mang Teng's understanding that in this feeling, it's really about the happiness of the other person, not something we get back (though what we do get back is the happiness that comes from that very feeling); and the understanding that metta really does reteach us all loveliness.

As Jill mentioned yesterday, there are many ways of practicing this. There are two main purposes of doing metta meditation. One is that loving-kindness can be used as a vehicle for developing concentration—not only for the metta quality itself, but as a technique or method for developing strong concentration, even to the point of absorption or jhana. There are very specific techniques for that.

The other purpose or aspiration with regard to its practice is not so much for deepening concentration, although it will have that effect to some extent. Rather, it's more the aspiration, as we do the practice in a more general way, to cultivate that capacity in ourselves for metta, for caring, for loving-kindness. Here the main objective is not absorption, but rather to fill the heart with that feeling and to be able to express it in the many ways we do.

In this second understanding or way of practicing—which is what we're doing here—you can be very creative. We'll offer some suggestions for how to practice it, but in terms of the language one uses, the phrases one uses, how it's done, we'll offer a variety of approaches. As you sit and practice, experiment a little and see what resonates the most, what connects you most deeply to this practice.

Traditionally, there are three components in doing the metta practice. The first component is having a clear perception of who we're sending it to. That could be ourselves, or it could follow the traditional list: a great benefactor for whom it's very easy to feel metta, a good friend, a neutral person (somebody we don't have many feelings for one way or another), a difficult person, or all beings. There are many different categories of beings we can direct the metta towards. We know who we're wishing well to; we have a clear sense of direction for the metta.

The second component is the support for the feeling, which consists of different phrases that we actually repeat in our practice. It almost becomes like a mantra of loving-kindness. We settle on some phrases that express our wish, our kind wish, and we repeat those phrases, concentrating on the meaning, directing it towards the image or the sense of the person. The phrases themselves become a vehicle for cultivating the feeling.

As Jill mentioned, there's a lot of creativity in finding phrases that express metta in a way that you resonate with. "May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you live at ease. May you live in safety." In a way, it's finding two, three, or four phrases that express what you would most wish for yourself. In your life, what is most meaningful in terms of what you would wish for yourself? Because when you connect with those particular expressions,

you'll be most connected to the wish for others. Because you feel it in yourself. Yes, just as I want to be happy, so may you be happy. And just as I want to live in safety, so may you live in safety. Just as I want to be free, so may you be free.

So this is the second component of the whole practice. The first is who we're sending it to. The second are the phrases that we use to express this wish of care and kindness. And the third aspect is the actual feeling—the emotional feeling of loving-kindness, of kindness, of care, whatever words resonate with you. It's that feeling of wishing well.

Keeping in mind that there are these three components, each of you may find it easier to give emphasis to one or the other. For example, for some people who can visualize easily, it's very natural to hold the picture in the mind of the person you're sending it to. Again, it could be yourself or anybody, but you're really holding the image of that per-

son in mind. Very often, especially when it's somebody for whom we already have a lot of love or care, simply being with the image evokes the feeling. You might think of a good friend, a really dear friend, and the image comes to mind and you may not even need any words. The feeling is there, and when you see them, it's like we're with them. We can feel the feeling of metta arise. So for people for whom that's easy, you might want to give some emphasis to the image—keeping the image steady as a way of evoking the feeling.

Some people find holding images in the mind quite difficult. The mind doesn't particularly work in that way. For them, the repetition of the phrases might be what's worth emphasizing. We're repeating this mantra of metta phrases. It's good to settle on two or three so we can just really sink into each one and feel each one, repeating over and over again. And as we drop into the meaning of the words, the meaning evokes the feeling. May you be happy.

So some people may focus predominantly on the image, some people predominantly on the repetition of the phrases, and some people, in a very easy way, may feel connected to the feeling of metta already. For some people it's very accessible—it's right there. We just have to kind of drop into the heart space and it's there. For people who have that connection, you might give emphasis simply to the feeling. Let yourself drop into the feeling of metta and then let it radiate, let the feeling radiate out towards the person or towards all beings.

In all of these cases, we most likely will be using all three—the image, the phrases, the feeling. But I've found it helpful, since we are all conditioned somewhat differently in terms of what comes easily, to use any one of those three doorways into the practice predominantly.

One last little thing before we drop into a little time of practice. I've done quite a bit of metta practice over the years, and it was transformative—and it wasn't easy. When I started, it was very difficult for a lot of reasons. Sometimes it was just because of an aberrant understanding of the practice.

At one time I was doing intensive metta practice for a couple of months at a time. And for about a week or so, I had this crazy idea that the faster I said the phrases, the more metta would come. I don't know where that came from. I was in Burma at the time. I don't know if it was a whole week, but it was more than a few days. I was just revving the whole thing up. It was ridiculous. So it took me a little while to realize this is not the way.

Like any other practice, for some people it's just really easy from the beginning, and for other people, for whatever reason, it's challenging. It doesn't matter. The practice itself, as you do it and continue, is deeply transforming. It really changes how we are in relationship to the world and other beings.

In terms of a little technique that came as I was doing the practice: I realized that one way was actually to have the feeling and the words be directed towards whoever, whether myself or other beings. And then at a certain point, I just played with a different perspective. This became more viable when I got more connected with the feeling and it was easier just to sit in the feeling. After you do the practice in whatever way and you really are connected—yes, you just have this feeling of wishing well.

So that becomes like a field, just a field of metta. And then I would simply imagine different people walking through the field. So I wasn't directing it outward. I was just sitting, creating the field, and then friends would walk through, and difficult people would walk through. It was lovely because then it was much less the feeling of me sending metta to you. It was just creating that feeling field and then basically inviting everybody into it. And it was lovely. Then it can be very spontaneous about who we think of to invite in. You can just play. You can be there and invite all the people you really love a lot in. Then when you're feeling particularly brave, invite some of the people who are challenging in your life. Let them enter your field of metta. So you can play with these two different ways and see what works for you.

Okay, so let's settle into the practice for a bit. In doing the metta, it's generally helpful, as much as possible, to sit reasonably comfortably. If you're in a lot of pain, that can be distracting for the cultivation of metta, unless you're actually sending metta to the pain. So sit in a way that is reasonably comfortable, where you're not struggling with your posture.

I find it helpful to just let the attention settle in the area of the heart center, the area in the center of the chest. Simply begin by feeling the breath there, just the feeling of the breath. You could think of it as going in and out of the heart center, or just feeling the energy at that space in the body. Resting in that area, breathing gently.

Then call to mind somebody for whom you have a natural feeling of love or friendliness or care. I suggest you pick an uncomplicated relationship—just somebody where it's very simple and easy. You think of them and you feel good. You think of them and you want them to be happy. Just call them to mind.

Play with the image, see if you can hold it. Maybe it will be steady and maybe it will be flickering, however it is, but you have a clear sense of who you're sending the metta towards.

Then pick a few phrases of what you would most wish for yourself. You might even spend the first minute or two with a linking phrase: just as I want to be happy, so may you be happy. Just as I want to be peaceful, so may you be peaceful. Find your own phrases. Don't rush through them. Connect the meaning with the person.

In a very light way, tune into the feeling behind the phrases. Keep the person in mind—an image of the person or just somehow the felt sense of the person—expressing what you most wish for them. Notice what it feels like when you're most connected with that loving wish. What is that feeling like?

Let either the image or the phrases be your anchor. Notice those times when they evoke a particular noticeable feeling of well-wishing. May you be happy and peaceful. May you live in safety and live with ease.

There will be many times when you're repeating the phrase and you don't have any particular feeling with it. That does not mean that you're devoid of metta. Just keep with the phrases, keep with the image. Sometimes the feeling is stronger, sometimes it's weaker, sometimes it's not even noticeable. Just keep going with the phrases, with the sense of the person. And then sometimes with a particular phrase we do have a noticeable feeling—oh, yes, this is what goodwill is, this is what metta is.

You can either stay with the same person or call someone else to mind, surrounding them with the feeling of loving care. It might be directing the phrases toward the image of them, or if you're settled into the feeling of metta, invite them simply into the field. Let them cross the field of your loving-kindness.

When the mind wanders, you can come back to the image, to the phrases, to the breath at the heart center. Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.

Settle the awareness on the breath at the heart center. Let each breath radiate the unspoken wish of loving care.

Sending each breath out into the world.

We can have a few minutes for questions about the practice if you like, but also for those of you who would like to stay in the silence and the field of metta and begin walking, that's fine. Feel free to do that.

*What did you mean when you said to tune into the meaning?*

Right, so tuning into the meaning behind the phrases. Actually, there were two different suggestions. One was to drop deeply into the meaning of the phrases, because one of the things that can happen is that the repetition gets mechanical. We just start repeating them, they become kind of dry, and we're simply going through the motions—disconnected from the depth of meaning of what we're actually saying. So it's a reminder to pause and ask, what is it that I'm actually wishing?

The second suggestion was this: as we connect with the wish, as we're really present with the meaning, one way of recognizing the specificity of the metta feeling is to notice where that wish is coming from. What's the feeling of the intention behind it? This isn't meant to be overly analytic, but simply inquiring: what's the heart space out of which we're wishing? And that often brings the recognition—oh yes, it's goodwill. Yes, like that.

*This is the first time I've tried the field approach, although I've felt something like it before. I was trying to let some of the more challenging people in, but the issue for me is one of safety. Could you talk about discernment—knowing that we're resting in Buddha nature, in consciousness, as love really, but also needing discernment?*

Yes, a few things with regard to that. First, I would recommend not starting with the most challenging people. Really strengthen the field of metta with people for whom it's easy to feel, so you become established in it. Then, when you're feeling somewhat stable, you might have them do a run-by. Because if you keep them there, it will probably start evoking all the complexity and concern about safety—all the issues which are very real. So you want to modulate how much attention you give to that category or that particular person as you're inviting them in.

Depending on who we're sending it to, it's also very important and effective to change the wish so that it's appropriate to the situation. Just as an example, I was teaching a retreat just after 9/11, and there were a lot of New Yorkers there. We were doing metta classically, going through the categories, and when we got to the enemy or challenging people, quite a few said, "There's no way I can send metta to people who flew planes into the World Trade Center." It was so traumatic.

This made me reflect deeply. The Buddha spoke of metta as universal, as encompassing all beings. But what does that mean? "May you be happy"—in that situation, that's not what's going to arise naturally. In reflecting upon it, I realized we need to change the language. For example, even toward people who cause tremendous harm, one could wish: may you be free of hatred. Is there anybody you would not wish that for? I don't think so, because if we want to express metta, it's precisely those mind

states—hatred, delusion—that are the cause of all harmful actions in the world. We can have metta in that sense for all beings, but we have to tailor the way it's expressed so that it's appropriate to the situation.

So in all these ways, you can work with it. But it takes care. Nothing should be forced. Dance with it.

*Sometimes what arises isn't exactly metta—it's more like compassion for their suffering.*

Yes, here's where metta can morph into compassion. Compassion is really metta directed specifically toward people who are suffering. That's what evokes it. The wish becomes slightly different, though close to the metta phrase. When we're doing compassion meditation, we visualize the person suffering, and the wish is: may you be free of suffering. We're there, connected with the reality of that person's experience, and that single phrase—may you be free of suffering—becomes the heart of the practice.

What's so remarkable in doing this practice is quite amazing, actually. But let me back up a moment. There's a concept in the teachings of the near enemy of all these states—a state that looks like metta or compassion but actually is not. With metta, the near enemy is often attachment. We take that to be love, but it's not.

It's a different state. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. Because it's easy, especially with people we love and their suffering, to go into sorrow. But sorrow is not compassion. Compassion is the wish to alleviate the suffering. It's like, how can I help? Or, may you be free of suffering.

The remarkable thing as we do this practice—and you might spend a little time with it, in fact we will during the retreat, we'll be offering specifically the compassion meditation—what's so amazing in doing it, even as we're addressing the suffering of an individual or the world, the feeling of compassion is uplifting. And that really highlights the difference between compassion and its near enemy of sorrow.

So as you do the practice, it would be interesting for you to play with that and begin to see what the effect is of your doing the compassion practice. You may find that you drop more easily into the uplifting aspect of compassion rather than the sorrow. In the sorrow, there's really aversion to the suffering. It's colored by aversion. We hate it. We don't want it. Whereas compassion is more positively expressed. It's the wish for somebody to be free of suffering. That's a beautiful wish. And as you repeat that and drop into it, even as you're relating to the suffering of that person, you find a heart that's very open and tender.

But all of this you have to see for yourselves. These are just suggestions for your own practice to explore. You don't have to believe me or any of it. Just try and see. Experiment.

One practitioner shared, "I was thinking about a couple of lifelong friends and I started with these general phrases—may they be healthy, may they be free from pain. And then I got really practical. I thought, why not? We wish for people what they want, if it seems in the realm of the wholesome."

Absolutely. I wouldn't worry so much about whether it fits the classical dictionary of metta terms. My basic mantra for all meditation practice, whether it's metta or vipassana, is whatever works. These are all skillful means. The idea behind the practice is to develop that feeling of care and love and strength. So whatever supports that is good.

Another question arose about techniques for developing the field, with the practitioner wondering if it might take a lifetime or more to figure out. But don't buy into that assumption. Rather than having an idea that there's some specific way to create the field, I think it's much more that we just do the practice, start in a more traditional way of sending the phrases, and then at those times when you feel connected, when you actually have a lot of goodwill—and it doesn't have to be spectacular, it can be very low-key, but you're just connected, you really are wishing this for this person—in those times when that feeling is there even in a mild way, just back off a little from the phrases, from the doing aspect, and drop back into whatever that feeling may be. Again, it could be very light, just a good feeling of kindness. In that dropping back into it, the field is created. You don't have to do anything more than that. Play with it. Have fun.

Someone else observed that they hadn't tried to use metta as a gateway into concentration before, but they were wondering if radiating metta, which they found really enjoyable, might work well since it has less doing, less self in it. Indeed, even if you're not specifically doing it with the aim of deepening concentration, it does have that effect. And if at a certain point you want to use the metta for the specific purpose of really deepening concentration and absorption, then you should work with a teacher. There are many teachers now who can teach that.

So you might do a retreat where you emphasize the particular techniques for that. It's somewhat different—you're using the same basic foundation of practice, but then there is a series of progressive instructions in terms of emphasizing the concentration aspect of it. The basic practice is the same, but what changes is what we do to emphasize the one-pointedness.

*Question from participant about what "uncomplicated" means in choosing a metta recipient*

Do you have a dog? Or a pet? It sounds funny, but I ask because sometimes people find it so easy with a pet—it's very uncomplicated. If there's such a being in your life, that can work beautifully. But another way, if you don't have Fido, is you might want to just start with a good friend, where there aren't necessarily the complexities of a strongly intimate relationship, but just somebody who's in your life, who you're good friends with and care about.

Don't overthink it—just play, try some different people, and see which person becomes easiest for you. Because even with a complicated relationship, it would still be possible if you visualize them and limit your consideration of the person during this particular time to just that sense of, "Yeah, I really do wish you well"—not getting into an analysis or the history of the whole relationship. You can simplify even a complicated relationship, but you could also just start with somebody you're not so entangled with. Again, experiment. Just play around.

*Question from participant about the intensity of doing metta for oneself*

Yes, it can be quite a lot. Just to reiterate again, play with it. Start with your dog, let the feeling arise—it's so easy—and then you might start directing it, before you go to yourself, to another person that it's fairly easy to feel the loving-kindness toward. Then maybe just start in a very brief way. Bring yourself into it, repeat the phrases a few times, see what you feel. If it feels like you're dropping into all the sorrow, then in terms of the metta practice, maybe pull back from that. Go back to your dog. Re-establish the actual feeling of simple well-wishing. Then you can bring yourself back into it, or you might visualize yourself with the dog.

I used to do that, actually. I had a good friend—it wasn't a complicated relationship—but a good friend who always had his little dog with him. So when I was doing the metta, I would just picture him and his dog. And it was lovely. It really brought a lot of joy.

Do you get the sense that you can be creative and see what works—and when it's too much, back off? In Vipassana, it's different. In Vipassana, if you begin to feel the sorrow, then we really turn towards the sorrow itself as an object of mindfulness. That's a different approach.

As with all of this, you will learn from doing it. Just as I had to learn that speed metta wasn't the way. I had to do a whole bunch of really stupid things. But that's how we learn. We see what works, what doesn't work.

I would just encourage you to incorporate this into your practice. And even in the walking—sometimes it's beautiful just to be walking and doing the metta, either towards a particular person or maybe you start doing metta towards everybody.

that you're passing. Maybe you're at home and walking down the street, and with everybody you see: *May you be happy. May you be happy.*

It's worth playing with and developing and cultivating, because it becomes more and more who we are—not something we do.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 41

# Mindfulness: The Methodology of Wisdom

Joseph Goldstein · 1h04

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein illuminates mindfulness not as an end in itself, but as a powerful methodology for developing wisdom and answering life's most fundamental questions—particularly, how can we be truly happy? Drawing from the Buddha's teachings, Goldstein demonstrates how mindfulness reveals that our actions of body, speech, and mind have direct consequences, and that the motivation behind our actions most determines their outcomes.*
>
> *The talk offers practical investigations into everyday experiences: examining how generosity feels compared to self-centeredness, kindness versus unkindness, and inclusive versus exclusive relating. Goldstein shares personal stories, including lessons from his teacher Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, to illustrate how we can learn to see all aspects of ourselves—including the shadow side—without judgment. He references the Buddha's teaching that "hatred never ceases by hatred" and explores how anger, with its "poisoned source and honeyed tip," seduces us while causing suffering.*
>
> *Crucially, Goldstein guides practitioners to investigate desire and aversion directly, discovering that desires need not be fulfilled to disappear, and that freedom comes through perceiving the impermanent nature of all phenomena. Citing Ledi Sayādaw, he emphasizes that seeing arising and passing away is the doorway to all stages of insight. Through a hands-together experiment, he demonstrates how dropping from concept to direct sensation reveals the constant flow of change—the very perception that, according to the Buddha, leads to non-clinging, non-agitation, and ultimately Nibbāna itself.*

The other night I was speaking about what mindfulness is and what it isn't, starting with the understanding that simply being in the present or living in the present is necessary, but it's not sufficient. If you remember the example of the black labs, who are in the present but don't look very mindful. We then discussed the difference between recognition and mindfulness—how we can recognize something that's present, but it's not necessarily mindfulness if we're observing the experience through a filter of wanting or not wanting, aversion, or delusion. Mindfulness is that particular kind of being with experience with a mind that's not colored by greed or wanting, not colored by aversion, not colored by delusion. We begin to get a sense of the clarity and the power of mindfulness.

As our understanding of what mindfulness is deepens, and our experience of it deepens, we can begin to see that it's a methodology for answering some of life's very basic questions. One of them being: How can I be happy? This is something that all beings are in search of.

As was often the case, John Lennon had some good words about this. He said, "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life." So he had something going even at five.

Another way of expressing this question—and I think this is really essential, a question that sometimes or often is not asked—is: What do I learn from being mindful? We give so much emphasis to understanding what mindfulness is, to the practice of it, to doing it, but mindfulness itself is not an end in itself. Mindfulness is a way, a methodology, for the development of wisdom. So the question that we really have to examine in our practice and in our lives is: I'm doing all this practice, I'm putting so much energy into the cultivation and development of this quality—what actually am I learning from it?

That's what I'd like to explore tonight: what we learn, or can learn, from being mindful.

One of the first things that hopefully becomes apparent as we learn to pay attention in this particular way is that what we do matters. Our actions, whether of the body, of speech, or of mind, have consequences; our actions bring about results. In classical Buddhist terms this is expressed as the law of karma. But we don't need some esoteric teaching about this. We can see very directly when we're being mindful that our actions —whether of body, speech, or mind—have consequences for us. Some kinds of actions lead to happiness. Some kinds of actions lead to suffering.

If we look even further, following the Buddha's guidance, we can see that what most determines the quality of the outcome is the motivation behind the action. Motivation becomes really important. It's easy to hear this as Buddhist philosophy, and it's interesting on that level, but it's not transformative. It's transformative when we see it for ourselves in our own experience. That's why we need to be mindful of the various mind states that accompany our various actions.

There are some very simple areas or arenas of investigation. This is not necessarily a particularly esoteric inquiry. We can really examine this in some very simple, basic, everyday situations. I'll give a few examples of how we can examine this and see for ourselves not only that what we do matters, but what actions or what qualities lead to what results.

A very simple question: What does it feel like when you're being generous? And what does it feel like when you're being self-centered, holding on? This is something we can examine many, many times. It's not something mysterious. When we're feeling generous and acting on it, what's the quality of our mind?

It becomes interesting when we pay a little more attention to the qualities of mind involved. What I've found is really quite beautiful: two things are going on, among others, when we're being generous. The qualities of mind, of heart, that are present generally include a feeling of mettā—we're being generous because we're having loving, friendly feelings towards somebody. And what also becomes obvious in the very act of giving is renunciation. We're letting go of something in giving it to someone else. If we're paying attention, we can get an experiential hit of exactly what the feeling of mettā is because we're experiencing it. We can also begin to taste the pleasure of renunciation.

is generally not so obvious, especially in our society. Renunciation doesn't have great PR. People hear the word and just the word itself evokes something that's perhaps good for us but that we don't really like, because it has connotations of deprivation and lack.

But actually, when we're experiencing the quality of renunciation—and another phrase that might illustrate or point to its freeing aspect is to think of renunciation as non-addiction, not holding on, not being addicted to things—in an act of generosity, we're not addicted. We're offering, and in that very act we can experience the beauty of that letting go, the freedom, the spaciousness in it.

So we begin to see, just by paying attention: How do I feel? What's it like when I'm being generous? What's it like when I'm not, when I'm being self-centered? And it's really interesting—like mindfulness or concentration or loving-kindness, generosity itself is its own practice. It's a quality of mind that we can cultivate, that we can develop. And we're all at different places along that development. For some people it's very easy; it's well developed in them and it's effortless to be generous. For other people with different conditioning, for whatever reason, it may not come so easily. And so you really need to practice, start practicing in a very slow and gradual way.

I had some very early lessons in this. Looking back, this goes back to my early college years, before I knew anything about Buddhism or the teachings or mindfulness. I was in a situation—maybe a freshman in college, living the poor student life. I had no extra money at all. But I had a friend come visit from Europe, and he really needed some money. I forget exactly the circumstance, but there was a real need. And so I thought, I think I had a few hundred dollars saved, and I thought, well, I'll just give it to him. He really needs it more than I do. And I did.

But in my mind at that time, because I still didn't really understand the whole dynamic and meaning of generosity, I remember wondering: Is this okay? Is it okay? I was just a young kid, and here I'm giving $300, which now doesn't seem like a huge amount, but at that time it felt like a lot. Is it okay to do this?

And it was striking, looking back, that this should even be a question in my mind. It made me realize that for many of us, we need to be told that it's okay. It's okay to be generous. And that it actually brings a lot of happiness.

Over the years I've worked with a practice about this that I have found just so rewarding. It's one of the practices I love the best. And it takes some care in doing it, which I'll mention. The practice is this: I've been doing it now for quite a few years—if I have the thought to give something, I make the practice to do it, not to second-guess myself. Sometimes it's just a little thing, maybe offering something or offering some time, a little gesture. Sometimes a thought comes and it's a big thing—something that maybe I'm attached to, or maybe it's quite a large gift. But if I have the thought, I do it.

And what's been amazing for me, having done this now for years: first, it's very spontaneous, because I'm not thinking about what I should give. No, I'm just going on in my life, but paying attention to those thoughts of generosity and not second-guessing myself. Not "I may need it later." Not "They don't really need it." Not "Maybe..." You know, all those doubting thoughts about whether we should be generous or not. So if I have the thought, for the most part—it's not perfect—but I try to just do it. And it's been wonderful.

But this is also a practice, and we're all in different places with it. So if there's some hesitation or wondering about our motivation—Am I doing it out of guilt? Am I really doing it, and is it too much for my means, so that if we do it we'll have regret? Is it an appropriate gift for the person?—all these questions could be entertained, especially at the beginning, as one is engaging or beginning to engage in this practice, until we really have felt out for ourselves the degree to which this practice can be skillful. So we start small.

You don't have to start with some huge thing.

The reason I'm emphasizing this so much now—and the Buddha emphasized it traditionally—is that he would begin all his teachings with a teaching on generosity because it is one of the most accessible avenues towards happiness. Again, we don't have to believe this. What I'm suggesting is that by being mindful of our own mind states, feelings, and emotions, and how they arise along with different actions we take, we see for ourselves that this is a source of happiness in our lives.

Thich Nhat Hanh had a wonderful little phrase. He's this Vietnamese mindfulness master and poet and writer and peace activist—quite an exceptional being. He said, "Happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it." We can, if we know the causes of happiness. And this is what the Buddha is pointing out. He's saying, if you want to be happy, why don't you try this? So generosity is one thing to try, and to be mindful of what's going on in us, in the other person, in what occurs as we are cultivating this very beautiful quality. But again, we have to start where we are and just be sensitive to how we're doing it for our own balance of mind.

Another very simple investigation: What does it feel like when we're being kind or unkind? Which do you think brings more happiness? Some of these things are so obvious. Sometimes I think of the Buddhist teaching—I could imagine the Buddha almost like he's teaching second graders. "Okay, be generous, be kind, don't kill." On one level it is that simple. But we're all kind of enmeshed in the patterns of our conditioning. We've all been conditioned and brought up and habituated in certain ways. So sometimes we need to relearn these very basic understandings and principles.

Kind or unkind? How does it feel when we're being inclusive with everyone, or exclusive, keeping people out? We can pay attention to that. Instead of just playing out the patterns, we really take a look: Is this a condition for happiness or not? And it's not theoretical. If in these moments of relating in these different ways we're being mindful, we can check it out for ourselves in terms of what's the effect on our hearts, what's the effect on our minds.

When we speak, is our speech bringing people together, uniting people, or is it dividing people? One of the most prevalent speech patterns in many people—and this is really common, probably common worldwide—is the tendency or the certain delight we can have in gossip, gossiping about other people. I've noticed both in my own speech in that regard and in listening to others that kind of speech very often has an underlying divisiveness. Talking about maybe somebody's faults or something—it's like

trying to get people on our side as we're speaking of others. So what would it be like first to see that? This kind of speech is dividing rather than uniting. This kind of way of relating is excluding rather than including.

These are ordinary everyday experiences we have. Are we paying attention? Because it's only through attentiveness to our own experience that some of these patterns can actually be transformed.

I had an early lesson in this. I was in India practicing in Bodh Gaya, which is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. This was in the early years, probably the late sixties, and very few people were there. Now there are lots and lots of Westerners who go. Then, I don't know, there may have been twelve or fifteen of us at this place. In between the times of intensive retreat, we would be doing our own practice, and we each had a little hut around the garden wall. But sometimes we'd get together more socially when we weren't doing intensive practice.

One night, this one woman who was there said, as we were gathering, that she had written a song and had a guitar and wanted to sing it for us. She said, "I wrote a song about each of you." My mind just assumed, without any reflection, that it would be like a humorous roast.

She would just pick out the quirky qualities of each person. It turns out that her song highlighted the good qualities in each person. And the unexpectedness of that has stayed with me all these years. It was so surprising that somebody would create something that illuminated all the good qualities in the people around her. It was really amazing—the feeling of metta and connectedness. It was such a beautiful evening.

So do you see how simple this is? This part of the practice is not complicated because it deals with bringing mindfulness into these very ordinary aspects of our experience. How we are with other people. How we are with our speech. But we're paying attention. We're watching our minds. What brings happiness? What brings peace? What doesn't?

What I hope you will take away from this retreat is the understanding that it's not enough to know all this conceptually or intellectually. We can know, "Oh yes, it's good to be generous and not to be stingy. It's good to be loving and not to be aversive." But knowing it conceptually or intellectually is very different from actually seeing directly, closely, and intimately the effect of these actions on our hearts and minds. It needs to become very experiential. We need to verify these understandings—these conceptual

understandings—in our own experience as we go through life. And that's what really gives energy for the purification of the mind. That's what gives energy for transformation.

Mindfulness can also lead us to more subtle levels of what brings us happiness, of what we can learn from being mindful. What's so interesting is that before we actually engage in this investigation, we can be pretty confused about the causes of happiness. We often do things wanting happiness, and yet we're doing the very things that cause suffering. This understanding, it's said, is what motivated the Buddha after his enlightenment as he viewed the world. He saw all these beings who were seeking happiness, wanting happiness, desiring happiness, and doing the very things that resulted in suffering—because of delusion, because of confusion. And that's what motivated him, it's said, out of compassion, to share the teachings.

So what are some examples of this? We can learn about it if we're mindful—really mindful—of what it's like when the mind is filled with wanting and desire. Now, we've been taught by society that those qualities actually bring us happiness. There was a sign in a New York store window that I saw while just walking down the street. The sign said, "Don't let desire pass you by." And then another ad for something or other proclaimed, "Nothing stands in the way of my pleasure." We're bombarded with messages that desire is good and that fulfilling desire is going to bring you happiness. Our whole culture is being fed that message.

It takes some keen mindfulness not to just go along and be influenced by all of that messaging, but to actually look for ourselves. When we are feeling wanting or feeling desire, to actually be mindful: What does that feel like? What does it feel like when the mind is free of desire?

As a little experiment—and I really encourage you to do this because it's revelatory and very impactful—the next time there's desire in the mind, just keep an eye out for when one might arise. It can be a big desire or a small one, whatever. But just be watchful. There's a desire arising in the mind, wanting. Just sit with it and be mindful of what it feels like when we're filled with this wanting.

What's interesting is that the wanting is often there because we think it's going to bring us happiness, but we're not paying attention to how it actually makes us feel. So really be watchful. There's desire. You're not trying to get rid of it. You're just observing: What's the effect of wanting and desire in my experience? And then the desire, at some point, all by itself will go away. One of the great insights, if you get this—

You will have saved yourself a lifetime of suffering: that you don't have to fulfill desires for them to go away. We think, when desires are strong, that the only relief will come from actually fulfilling them. But desires are impermanent like everything else. They will go all by themselves.

So in this experiment, the next time you're feeling some desire or wanting for anything, notice what it feels like, hang out with it for as long as it's there, and then notice what it feels like when the desire goes. That's the key moment. My experience has been, and in talking with yogis over all these years, it's a common experience: desire, desire, desire, and then when it goes, it feels like we've been let out of the grip of something. The desire has held us in its grip, and there's a certain contraction and tension in that, even if we're associating it with some pleasant fulfillment. But the actual experience of wanting, and then it ends—all of a sudden, it's like the heart and the mind are released out of the grip and the seduction of wanting. We can feel this. This is not theoretical, because we're there in the experience, being mindful of it as it's happening. We actually experience the freedom or the release or the peace or the openness or the spaciousness of not wanting.

This is huge, because it can reorient our thinking about what's really important in our lives and what actually does bring happiness. I'm not suggesting that we should never act on our desires. It's not about that. We do act on them, and this is just part of living in the world. There's nothing wrong with the enjoyment of different pleasures—all of that's fine. But can we understand deeply what's really going on, so that we don't devote our life energy to the fulfillment of desire in the pursuit of happiness? Because it's not going to give us what we want. It's not going to bring that result. We need to see this. Again, you hear the words and you might agree or disagree, but I'm just inviting you to check it out.

This is a really important piece. When the Buddha laid out the Four Noble Truths, he talked about the truth of difficulty or the truth of suffering, and what the cause was on a fundamental level: craving. And that the end of that dukkha, that suffering or difficulty, is the end of craving.

One of the interesting things that happened in my practice over the years—in the early years, I used to practice with the idea that I understood the teachings of the Third Noble Truth, the end of suffering, the end of craving, and I would have the thought: well, maybe in twenty or thirty years, or five lifetimes, I'll come to the end of craving. I put it off as a far-off goal. And then at a certain point, I was on retreat and I realized: I can practice the end of craving now, even if it's just for a few moments. I can pay attention to what it's like when there's wanting and then not wanting, and actually get a

taste—a taste of that peace when we're let out of the grip of it. This is not something that needs to be postponed for full and complete enlightenment. We can have many moments of mini-enlightenment throughout the day.

In a similar way, in terms of using mindfulness to investigate what really are the causes of happiness in our lives, what we can learn from being mindful is to pay attention when we're feeling a lot of aversion or anger. What does it feel like? Just look at it as objectively as possible, so you're not involved in self-judgment or blame or anything—you're just investigating. Aversion is in the mind: anger, irritation, annoyance, all the forms of it. The mindfulness is just a way of understanding it in its own nature. Oh, anger feels like this. Irritation feels like this. We will have a very direct experience.

But what's so interesting is how seductive the feeling of anger is. It's a powerful energy, and often when we're feeling anger in different circumstances, we feel empowered because it's a powerful energy. Often we feel strong as we're in the midst of that emotion. But the Buddha uses one little example which, to my mind, just captures the subtleties and nuances of this feeling. He said, "Anger, with its poisoned source and honeyed tip." Anger with its poisoned source and honeyed tip, sweet tip. Yes, it's exactly like that. There is a sweetness. When we're really angry, there can be a delight—yes!—and we get seduced by the honeyed tip, not seeing the poisoned source.

What does that mean? It's a dramatic term, but it really refers to something as simple as paying attention to the effect of anger on our minds, so that we see the contraction and the aversion and the feeling of separation and the feeling of self-righteousness. Even though we may often justify the anger to ourselves—in this situation I should be angry—who is it that's suffering? We are the ones who are suffering. But often we're not really being mindful, so we're not really seeing it or feeling it, the suffering of it.

Having said all that, it's also important to realize that at times, powerful emotions like anger are telling us something that we need to pay attention to. There's some value in recognizing what's happening, in seeing the honeyed tip and the poisoned source, but also seeing: is there a message here? Is there something that needs responding to?

Sometimes, maybe, strong anger may arise in the face of injustice. We see the injustice, whether it's toward us or other beings, and in the face of that injustice, it arouses anger in us, and outrage.

Or maybe there's a situation with individuals who are involved in harmful actions, and the anger becomes a signal, a message that we need to set boundaries. That's important and skillful.

The challenge is: can we understand the message? Is this anger telling us something about the situation that needs a response? Can we understand what it's communicating and take appropriate action, but without being overwhelmed by the anger and then acting it out in ways that might be quite unskillful?

Do you see the difference? The arising of the emotion may be telling us something. We want to hear the message. But then we don't want to be acting out with that energy of anger. We want to be acting with balance, with effectiveness, with what's going to be skillful and appropriate in this moment.

One of the most famous lines in Buddhist teaching—and it's easy to hear this almost as a cliché, but there's profound meaning in it for all of us as we live—is where the Buddha said: hatred never ceases by hatred; it only ceases by love or loving-kindness. It's a very simple statement, but we can see it in the world. When there's hatred, when we're either on the receiving end or the giving end or we're just observing it, does hatred ever bring about peace? I don't think so. Hatred just breeds hatred. It comes back, it escalates, and so much of the huge conflict and suffering in the world stems from these mutual hatreds that sometimes have been going on for generations. Hatred never ceases by hatred, even though it's so easy to fall into that pattern.

So can we pay attention? Hopefully none of you are consumed by hatred, but even with little aspects of it, really pay attention and see that there's another possibility.

A very essential part of our practice is the gradual, expanding willingness to see every part of ourselves. I mentioned in a group this line from the book *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis, which was popular back in the day. One of the characters said, "Self-knowledge is always bad news." Which I think you're discovering. Because as we settle into mindfulness and awareness, this expanding ability to be with the whole show of our life and our minds, unless we happen to be saints, we're going to see the shadow side. There's a lot in us—much that's wholesome and some that's unwholesome.

Our practice of mindfulness gives us a greater and greater ability to actually open to all sides of ourselves. If we're not willing to see it, if we're not willing to acknowledge, "Oh yes, there are these defilements, they're there, I can see them," then there's no possibility actually for purification or for letting go, because we're not even willing to acknowledge that they're present. So even though it's a challenging part of the practice, it's extremely important and transforming when we're willing to simply see all of these negativities in the mind.

A big shift takes place when, instead of judging them or ourselves, we actually delight in seeing them—because we'd rather see them than not see them.

I had an experience with Sayadaw U Pandita. As I've mentioned, he was a pretty fierce, demanding teacher with a very powerful presence. Somehow, in sitting with him, especially in the early years, I would feel like my mind regressed to a three-year-old. Going in, I'd be really nervous, wondering, "Is he going to approve of me?" All of that stuff.

What he was doing during that first period of time was that in every interview—maybe not every one, but many—I'd give my report, and he would simply point out the various defilements in my mind, which he could tell just from my report. At first, it made me feel terrible. I was judging myself, and then I was projecting that he was judging me, which just made it worse, which made me even more reluctant to go in. But he kept doing this.

It wasn't easy. But at a certain point, after months, I went in, gave my report, and he listed ten different defilements in my mind. "Here's greed, here's conceit, here's pride, here's this, here's that." And I just started to laugh. At that point, as he was going through the whole litany of my defilements, I just started to laugh.

It was amazing. As soon as I stopped taking it so seriously, he stopped doing it. That was the last time I went in for an interview and he did that. In retrospect now, I can see how skillful it was—though it didn't feel that way at the time. He just kept pushing my buttons as long as there was a reaction. When there was no longer a reaction, he didn't have to do it anymore.

In this opening to the full range of what's in there, we actually want to be seeing the shadow side as well as the bright side, because that's how we come to a fuller understanding of ourselves—and learn how to see it without self-judgment, without blame, without

This can actually be a delight. "Oh good, I see you."

One of the lines that appears quite often in the texts is when the Buddha will address Mara—Mara being the embodiment of ignorance and delusion. Mara will be up to some tricks, and the Buddha will simply say, "Mara, I see you." And then Mara disappears.

This is what it's like when we see the various defilements in our minds. We can say, "Ah, Mara, I see you. Jealousy, I see you. Pride, I see you. Greed, I see you." Just that—being mindful of the whole range of our experience—is the pathway to freedom, to liberation. And so we can take delight in the seeing.

As we become less judgmental of ourselves, one of the very happy consequences is that we become less judgmental of others. We can really see how much we've been projecting judgments onto others precisely because we're judging ourselves so much. When we learn not to do that, when we learn to simply be with things as they're presenting themselves, there's a tremendous lightness.

This was expressed beautifully by the English poet W.H. Auden. One line from his poems reads: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart." I love this because it acknowledges we're all in the same boat. We all have this mix of qualities. If we can be with that and understand it without judgment, without blame, without reactivity, then we can love ourselves and love others with all our crooked hearts. There's a lightness of being that comes from this.

Besides seeing what is wholesome in the mind—and wholesome is really just another word for happiness-producing; these are the qualities of mind that actually bring us happiness and peace—in the practice of mindfulness we can take it even deeper and really see what leads to freedom. Whatever word resonates for you—you might use freedom, or peace, or truth—whatever symbolizes the highest understanding, the highest value.

The application of mindfulness that truly sets us on the path to freedom, not simply to the happiness of wholesome mind states but to actual liberation, is the mindfulness that allows us to see the momentary nature, the changing, impermanent nature of everything arising.

This is something we know conceptually, intellectually. If you happened to find anybody on the streets of Barre and asked them, "Do things change?" everybody would say, "Yeah, of course things change." This is not an esoteric truth. We all know it conceptually, but we're not living what we know because it's all up here. It's mindfulness that actually drops us directly into the experience of the unfolding process moment to moment. We experience for ourselves, intimately and directly, that all of life is a flow. There's nothing static, nothing that stays the same. It's all a process of change.

I want to do a little experiment now, because there's an aspect of the teachings that allows us to drop into the direct experience of change, but people often miss it because they don't necessarily understand what's involved.

If you just hold your hands together like this—you have the experience. Now, I want you to imagine being somebody who's never meditated before. You're that person now who's never meditated. If I asked you, "What do you feel?"—what do you think that person would say?

The answer I'm looking for is this: to the untutored person, the person untutored in meditation, the answer would be, "I feel my hands. I feel my hands touching."

But we do not feel our hands. There's no sensation called "hand." Hand is a concept. Hand is a mental construct, a name for what we see.

So we create the name. And so what do you feel? "I feel my hand touching." We don't feel hand. What we feel is warmth or coolness or pressure or tingling or vibration. Those are the actual sensations that we're feeling.

So why make a big deal of this? Because as long as we're living as we do—to a very large and unexamined extent, to the extent that we're living and perceiving in the world of our concepts about things—the concepts don't change. Hand today, hand tomorrow, hand yesterday. So when we're perceiving things on the level of concept, we are not in the direct experience of the flow of changes. And so we live in the illusion of things being relatively unchanging or relatively stable.

This is the same of everything. This is the body. As long as we think of "the body," we feel "the body." There's no sensation called body. The body is a concept. But what is it that we actually feel? The sensations that we feel are the things that I mentioned. And what's very apparent as soon as we drop to that level—and it's really simple, we just drop to the level of what's actually being felt rather than the conceptual image—as soon as we drop to the level of sensation, we are right there seeing the changes. These sensations of pressure, tightness, tingling, tension, whether it's this or just the sensations in the body or as we're moving through the day—when you're being mindful on that level, the flow of changes becomes so apparent. This is a level we need to drop down to. Our meditation has to go from that level of concept to the level of direct experience, because that's where impermanence reveals itself.

So, halfway through. For you this hour may seem like five hours; for me it feels like five minutes. I just want to give you a few examples, simple ways of dropping down into this flow of impermanence, because this is the doorway to liberation.

In very simple things, you know, you hear a sound. The untutored person—what do you hear? "I hear the bell." We don't hear a bell. There's a certain vibration. And even the vibration of the sound, the sound itself, is not one thing. There's nothing permanent in that process. It's all moment to moment. It's a flow.

You take a step. The conceptual level is, "Oh, I feel my foot, I feel my leg." We don't feel foot, we don't feel leg. No sensation called foot. We feel heaviness, we feel pressure, we feel tightness. So first it's just to get to the level of sensation, and then when we're on that level, to see that even in one step it's not one thing. In one step, many, many sensa-

tions. In one breath—an in-breath, an out-breath, a rising—it's not one thing. How many different sensations are happening in the course of one breath? So that's the direction, that's how we want to use the mindfulness to really investigate on that level the impermanence of our experience.

I'm going to wrap this up. Why? Why do this? The Buddha gave a very simple statement outlining the trajectory of awakening. This is useful for us. He just lays out a few very simple elements of the process of liberation. And it's all tied, it all has its beginning in the experience of impermanence, which is why I wanted to emphasize it. He said, "In perceiving impermanence, the mind doesn't cling."

When it doesn't cling, the mind is not agitated. When it's not agitated, it personally attains Nibbana, the highest peace.

A few very simple steps: seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. Not clinging, the mind is not agitated. Not agitated, we're right there in the vicinity of awakening.

As with many other things, I had read this so many times and just took it as a description of the process. It was only in recent years that I took those words as an instruction to actually look, to verify whether what he said was actually true in my experience.

I invite you to do the same. At whatever time in the day, in any activity, whether it's sitting or walking or moving around—when you really feel like you are in the flow of perceiving impermanence, you're with the flow of changes—it could be something very simple, like just the flow of changes in a movement. Or if you're in choiceless awareness—breath, hearing, thinking—you're just noting moment after moment what's arising, but you're really seeing the changing nature. At those times when you are perceiving the flow of changes, check out whether there's any clinging in the mind.

See for yourself. You're not just accepting this as a description. You're asking, is what the Buddha said true for me? When we're seeing impermanence, is there clinging? I think you'll find that there isn't, but you need to see it for yourself. In the moment of clinging, it's like we're damming the flow. But when we're in the flow of impermanence, we can really experience the mind of not clinging. If you look to check, you will have a very direct taste of what the non-clinging mind is like. You don't have to wait thirty years to experience this. It's right here. When you're perceiving impermanence, just check out—is the mind clinging or not?

If you find there's not, if you're just in the flow of experience and you're not grabbing on, not holding on, then check out the next statement: when there's not clinging, there's no agitation. Just check—okay, there's no clinging. Is the mind agitated now

or not? I think you'll see that it isn't. So again, we get a very profound taste of what it means to have a mind free of agitation. We can hear the words, but we have to translate them, connect them to our own experience. Oh, this is non-agitation.

In that state, we actually do get—even if it's an intuitive sense—in those times of really experiencing the non-agitation, we get an intuitive sense of the potential, the taste of enlightenment, of freedom. We're in the ballpark of liberation. We have to see this for ourselves, and it's not hard to do. It's just doing it.

I'll close with this. There was a very famous Burmese Sayadaw, a meditation teacher who was very renowned. He was both a fantastic scholar and a meditative adept, considered a great enlightened being. His name was Ledi Sayadaw. This is what he wrote, and it's really about what we've been talking about:

"Not seeing things arising and passing away is ignorance."

Not seeing the flow of impermanence is ignorance. And if we're not seeing it, we're just living in ignorance, doing the very many things that create suffering in our lives.

"Not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening."

This is not a trivial thing. Even though on some level it's very simple—we can drop into every aspect of our experience and see its changing nature—we have to practice doing it because we're not in that habit. Seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening. That's what you're doing here, or should be doing here.

I want to remind you of something I think you're all very well aware of: this is really a precious time. The creation of a retreat container like this, with this kind of support and environment for the practice, is so rare. It's rare in the world and rare in our lives.

So all of us, after great good fortune—karma, whatever conditions came together—find ourselves here in practice.

Let's just sit for a minute or two.

*Thank you for listening.*

CHAPTER 42

# Dukkha and Non-Self

Joseph Goldstein · 1h19

> *In this profound teaching, Joseph Goldstein examines the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second discourse given to the five ascetics at Sarnath. Goldstein begins by expanding our understanding of dukkha beyond mere 'suffering' to include unreliability, insecurity, and ultimate unsatisfactoriness—a crucial reframing that illuminates why all conditioned phenomena, even pleasurable ones, cannot provide lasting fulfillment.*
>
> *The talk explores how the physical body and material elements lead to affliction and remain ungovernable according to our will. Through practical examples—from the necessity of changing postures to relieve discomfort, to the universal experiences of aging, illness, and death—Goldstein demonstrates that movement masks dukkha and that we mistakenly believe ourselves exempt from these truths. He introduces the Buddha's five daily reflections from the Aṅguttara Nikāya as powerful contemplations for keeping these realities in awareness.*
>
> *Goldstein addresses the deepest challenge: how consciousness itself becomes 'the last holdout of self' when we identify with the knowing faculty. Using the metaphor of a rainbow—an appearance dependent on conditions rather than a thing in itself—he points toward the liberating understanding that what we call 'self' is simply empty phenomena rolling on. The talk concludes with the Buddha's instruction to Rāhula and the unexpected revelation that selflessness and love are ultimately the same realization: being nothing, we are everything.*

After the Buddha's enlightenment, it's said that he spent seven weeks under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya—under and around the Bodhi tree—just contemplating the realization and understanding of his great awakening.

Then he was wondering who he might be able to share these profound teachings with. He thought of the five ascetics with whom he had been practicing the ascetic mortification disciplines for many years, and he thought that their minds would be ripe to hear and understand these teachings.

So he journeyed on foot from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath—it took him about six weeks. Sarnath is a small village across the river Ganges from the city of Benares, sometimes known as Varanasi. On the full moon of June, he gave his first discourse to these five as-

cetics. It's the discourse in which he outlined what is known as his teachings of the middle way—that is, the middle between the extremes of sense indulgence and self-mortification.

This first discourse is called "Turning the Wheel of the Dharma" or "Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion." This was his first teaching after his enlightenment. And it's interesting—this wheel of the Dharma has now rolled over the last 2,600 years across Asia, across Europe, across the oceans, to Barry, Massachusetts. It's quite an amazing happening, the transmission of these teachings over thousands of years.

In this first discourse, what's included is the structure, the basic foundation, of the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are the foundational Buddhist teachings in all the Buddhist traditions. This is what's basic and in common in all the traditions—in Theravada, in Mahayana, in Vajrayana. They will center in one way or another, or elaborate, these Four Noble Truths.

Upon hearing the teaching, one of the five ascetics realized the first stage of awakening called stream-enterer, or in Pali, sotapanna. This one ascetic heard the teachings and his mind opened to that level of realization. Then, practicing over the next few days with the Buddha as their guide—some good karma there—the remaining four ascetics realized the fruit of stream entry.

Then the Buddha gave the second discourse, which in Pali is called the Anatta Lakhana Sutta, which means the discourse on the characteristics of non-self or no-self. So in his very second discourse, he's laying out the teachings for this central understanding—the understanding of non-self. He gave this second discourse on the characteristics of non-self, and all five ascetics became fully enlightened.

So we're going to try for that tonight.

The teachings on non-self are really at the heart of the teachings. They're critical and central and essential in the Buddha's understanding of the path to awakening. But unlike the truths and the experience of impermanence or of dukkha—which are obvious and not difficult to understand even if we don't fully realize them yet, but we can easily grasp their import—the teachings on non-self are in many ways counter-intuitive. They run counter to our common sense, everyday understanding of who we are.

We live our lives having been taught, and we grow up with a very strong sense that there's a self here who's experiencing life's experiences. And that's hardly questioned. Certainly there's nothing in our culture, or even particularly in Western philosophical traditions, that even remotely refers to this idea or understanding of non-self. In fact, our very language—the languages that we use, most languages—reinforce the sense of

"I." "I" is the subject of our grammar in many ways. So we're continually reinforcing the notion that there is an "I" who is the subject of all experience. It's no wonder that when we hear "non-self," we think, what can that possibly mean?

The Buddha went on to explain it and to really show us how we can begin to open to this understanding for ourselves. I'm going to be reading at different times some excerpts from this sutta, the sutta explaining the characteristics of non-self. When you listen to the words, try to listen to them as if it were the Buddha speaking directly to you, rather than as just Buddhist philosophy. Because if you're listening to it as Buddhist philosophy, it's very easy for the mind to get in—you agree, you disagree. It's not that helpful, because it's all on the intellectual, conceptual level. If you listen to the words as if the Buddha is speaking to you, just as he was speaking to the five ascetics, and you really let the words in, into your heart, and relate them to your experience, then they have transformative power. And maybe there will be five or six or a hundred enlightened beings at the end.

In reading from the sutta, there's one word that I'm not going to translate from the Pali, and that is the word dukkha. The Four Noble Truths all revolve around this word. The first noble truth is the truth of dukkha.

The second noble truth is the cause of dukkha. The third noble truth is the end of dukkha. The fourth noble truth is the path leading to the end of dukkha. So it seems pretty important that we have a clear understanding of what this word means.

The problem is that in English, there is no single word that captures the full range of what's meant by this Pali term. As many of you probably know, most commonly it's translated as suffering—the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, the path leading to the end. And in many situations this translation is appropriate. We're all familiar with the pain and suffering that can occur, and does occur, in our minds and bodies during our lives. This is not some esoteric experience. We all experience suffering of different kinds. So one of the meanings of dukkha is suffering, and that's fairly easy to understand.

But how do we reconcile the Buddha's far-reaching statement that all conditioned things—which means everything that arises in our experience, in the mind, in the body, in the world, the entire conditioned flow of experience—how do we reconcile his statement that all conditioned things are dukkha with our experience of many things in life being pleasurable? How does that fit together? If we take dukkha just to mean suffering, then it doesn't really make sense, because as we know, much of our lives may not involve any particular suffering. We may be enjoying beautiful things, happy states.

Other words besides suffering may more fully convey what dukkha means, and it's important to understand this because then we can enter into this discourse and receive the full import of what the Buddha is trying to say. Words like unreliable—dukkha meaning unreliable—or insecure, or ultimately unsatisfying. These terms more completely encompass what is meant by the term dukkha.

So when the Buddha says all conditioned things are dukkha, it's not that they're always suffering, but they are always unreliable. They are always incapable of giving lasting fulfillment and satisfaction precisely because they don't last. In this understanding of dukkha, we're already beginning to relate it more fully to our life experience. No matter what's arising, it may be very pleasurable, it may bring us a lot of happiness—yet even in the enjoyment, even in the happiness, we can still understand the dukkha aspect as being unreliable, as being not capable of ultimately fulfilling us.

So when you listen to the Buddha's words from the Sutta and you hear the term dukkha, keep in mind this more expansive meaning. It doesn't simply mean suffering, although that's one aspect of it. It also means that all things are unreliable, ultimately unsatisfying, and that this can apply—and does apply—to every aspect of our experience. We should investigate for ourselves to see if it really does apply in our lives.

It is this understanding of dukkha, the unreliability of phenomena—and sometimes the painful nature of experiences, so suffering is included—but it's in understanding the expanded version that we can begin to see the connection between our experience and realization of dukkha and of anatta, or not-self. There's a very intimate connection between these two aspects. And it's really in understanding the relationship of dukkha to selflessness, of dukkha to anatta, that opens the doorway to freedom, to realization.

So this is from the Sutta, just a few lines from it. Usually discourses are introduced with a little preface: "On one occasion, the Blessed One was living at Benares, Varanasi, in the deer park in Sarnath, and there he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five." Remember, these are the five ascetics. This is the second discourse. He said, "Bhikkhus." "Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this.

Just one little note on the term bhikkhu, which is often translated as monk, or bhikkhuni as nun. But in this context bhikkhu also has a bigger meaning. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator of our time, commented that bhikkhu in its broadest sense means anyone who is walking on the path. So in that sense, we're all bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. We're all on the path, walking it. When the Buddha says "bhikkhus," he's really talking to us all. You should hear it that way.

"Bhikkhus, form"—and by form, what's meant is the physical body, the physical material elements. This is what's included, what's designated by the term form.

You might think of form most easily as the body, but it really encompasses all physical elements. Because form is non-self—or body is not self—were form self, then this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine: let my form or my body be thus, let my form or body not be thus. But because form is non-self, it leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine: let my form be like this, let my form be not like this.

Let me unpack that a little. It's really very simple, but the language may seem somewhat archaic. Here the Buddha is highlighting two aspects of the relationship between dukkha and non-self. First, he's saying that the elements of the body lead to affliction. If we were really self, we generally wouldn't take those things that lead to affliction and suffering to be "I" or to be "me." But the elements of the body do lead to affliction. Second, these physical elements are ungovernable—they are ultimately not subject to our will. The body doesn't respond to our commands. Let my body be like this. Let it not be like this. It's not like that. The body is following its own natural laws. So in two ways: it leads to affliction, and the elements are not governable according to our will.

We need to investigate this for ourselves—not hearing it as Buddhist philosophy, but seeing: is this true in my own experience? And we must observe how these two aspects, leading to affliction and not being governable, play out in our lives.

How do the physical elements lead to affliction? This is not hard to see, even if very often we don't like to acknowledge it. We can really observe the afflictive nature of the elements, what we call the body, in some of the very ordinary activities of our daily life. There is the affliction of hunger and thirst. We don't often recognize this because for most of us, these afflictions are easily remedied. We're thirsty, we take a drink. We're hungry, we take some food. But it is precisely the dukkha of the elements that leads us to these remedies. Why do we take a drink? Because there's some kind of suffering, of thirst. Why do we eat? Because there's the affliction or the suffering of hunger.

For many of us, this suffering is easily remedied. But for millions, perhaps billions of people, these basic needs are not easily fulfilled, and so the dukkha aspect of the elements in those situations becomes extremely obvious. Some time ago I read that over a billion people in the world don't have access to clean, safe drinking water. That's huge. If every time we take a drink, we're opening ourselves to disease, that's real affliction, that's suffering. The same article mentioned that millions of women across the world often have to walk three or more miles a day to carry twenty-five pounds of water, just to get water to drink, to bathe, and to wash.

We forget this. Some years ago I was with my family for Thanksgiving, and we did a little round saying what we were grateful for. One thing that came to mind—I was coming from teaching a three-month retreat—was the fact that water comes out of a tap, that most of the time we can get hot water out of a tap. We don't even think about it because it's so ordinary. Yet for many people that's not available, and when it's not, it becomes very clear that hunger and thirst are real bodily afflictions. There is suffering involved in this, and because of that suffering, we're moved to different kinds of actions.

We can also see the afflictive nature of the material elements in the very intense natural disasters that happen.

The eruption of volcanoes, floods, hurricanes—these are physical elements, just the elements of nature. And yet, in those forms, they're tremendously destructive. We've all seen the amount of suffering caused by the impact of those elements.

We can experience the afflictive nature of the body in the simple necessity to move and change posture in order to relieve discomfort. At a certain point, regardless of what posture you're in, it will become painful. You're walking. It feels great—walking, moving the body. Walk for two hours, three hours, four hours, five hours. "Oh, it feels good. I'll just walk for days." No, the body gets tired. When it gets tired or sore or achy, we have to rest it. We have to sit or lie down.

If you're sitting—oh, great, I'm sitting. I have a nice posture here. I'll just sit till I get enlightened. I recommend trying it. But what happens? After a certain point, sitting in one posture, the body gets stiff. It gets painful. We have to change the posture in order to relieve the suffering. "Oh, that's okay. I'll just lie down. Lying down will be really comfortable."

I had this thought once when I was practicing in India. I was so fed up with the suffering of the body from the postures, so I got a big piece of thick foam to sleep on, to lie down on. I lay down on my back, nothing crossed—my legs weren't crossed, my arms weren't crossed—supported by this nice, soft foam rubber. It was comfortable for about half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes. At a certain point, even in that position, nothing crossed, completely supported, it gets painful.

Why? Because in the nature of the material elements, there is an afflictive nature in the very elements themselves. It's not that we're doing something wrong. This is the nature of the elements, of having a body. And it's not hard to see if we're paying attention.

There's a little catch phrase which would be very interesting for you to apply in your practice as a tool of investigation. The catch phrase is: movement masks dukkha. At times, just out of interest, every time you move, see if you can pay attention to what's motivating the movement. Very often—not always, sometimes we're moving out of a greed for something that may not be associated in that moment with physical discomfort—but largely, movement masks dukkha. We move in order to alleviate, to relieve a kind of stress in the body. Pay attention to that, because it will give you a very direct insight into what the Buddha is saying: because form, the body, is non-self, it leads to affliction. It's just following its own laws. It's not subject to our will.

What's interesting is that because we're not paying attention in this way, as we alleviate the suffering—either by taking a drink or taking food or changing posture—we confuse how movement masks dukkha with the belief that we're in control of it. "I'm in control of whether the body feels dukkha or not." This obscures the nature of the elements themselves. But at some point or other, the ungovernable nature of these elements—even though we can make these various moves to mask the dukkha—at some point the afflictive nature becomes obvious and unavoidable.

Probably we would all like to stay young and healthy with a vigorous, active body that can accomplish everything we'd like it to do. But the body is not obliging us in this way. Quite without our agreement, the body ages and becomes ill and will eventually die. It's subject to all kinds of unwished-for ailments and diseases. This is the nature of the elements. Again, it's not that we've somehow made a mistake in life, that we've taken a wrong turn, and on this turn the body ages.

And it wouldn't have aged if I had made the right decision. No, it's unavoidable because it is the very nature of the elements. And this is what the Buddha is pointing out to us.

What's so amazing really is that when we look, it's completely obvious. And yet, for the most part in our lives, we don't look. We are distracting ourselves from this very basic truth.

It's for this reason that the Buddha said form, the body, the physical elements, is not self. If the body were self, we should be able to determine, "Let it be like this and not like this." But we can't determine that. Why? Because it is ungovernable according to our will. We can influence, and the things we do certainly influence what goes on in the body, but ultimately, things are simply following the laws of nature.

And the very laws of nature—and this is something people sometimes don't like to acknowledge—the physical elements, the nature of the elements, do lead at times to affliction. So we just want to see that and acknowledge: yes, this is how it is. This is the nature of the body. And so then we're not thrown when these afflictions happen to us. This is the Dharma. This is how things are.

So what do we do as we begin to open to this understanding? What do we do in response to it? How do we engage with the body, with the world, with our lives, knowing this?

The Buddha, again, pointed out that given this nature of the body—that the material elements lead to affliction—he showed the way to be free in this. He gave some very specific instructions. He said, "Bhikkhus," and that's all of us, "whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

So what does abandon mean? All of this is translation from Pali into English, and sometimes the English words can have a connotation that's not exactly what's meant from the Pali term. Abandon here—abandon what is not yours—doesn't mean to ignore. It doesn't mean to deny. It doesn't mean to not take care of the body or take care of the material world around us.

Rather, the Buddha is saying these elements in their nature lead to affliction—don't cling to it. Don't cling to it as being I or mine. Don't cling to things staying a certain way, because they won't. Everything is in a process of change and transformation. The whole world is in this process of change.

And yet how much of our suffering in our lives, on all kinds of levels, happens because there's some situation that we want to stay? You meet the love of your life and are hopelessly—or hopefully—in love. And you want the person to remain exactly as they are: "Yes, I love you just the way you are, and don't change." Well, if anything is a setup for suffering, that's going to be it.

The Buddha is saying don't cling to any aspect of this process, because things are going to change, and not always change according to our liking. Sometimes it will, but sometimes it won't, and we don't necessarily have control of that.

So the challenge is really to apply this understanding. To know it intellectually or to grasp it conceptually is a beginning, but that's not enough. We actually have to apply this understanding in how we're relating to the experiences of our body, of our mind.

The identification with our bodies is so deeply conditioned. What's the first response often to just the question, "Who are you?" This is me. This is who I am. We point to our bodies. We are so deeply conditioned to take the body to be me, to be self.

So how can we keep these understandings of non-self present? Because the elements of the body, the material elements, do lead to affliction in so many different ways, and they are ungovernable—we can't control and say, "Oh, let my body stay like this." It's not going to happen. So how do we integrate this understanding in our lives and really keep it in the forefront of our awareness?

I'm sure none of this comes as a surprise to you. It's all obvious as soon as we look, as soon as we pay attention. But for the most part, we just put it on the back burner because, as Al Gore said about something quite different, it's an inconvenient truth. We don't like to see it. But in not liking to see, we do the very things which cause more suffering—we get attached and we cling. And that just exacerbates the whole situation.

So how do we keep this awareness, this understanding, in the forefront of our lives? There's a collection of discourses in Pali called the Anguttara Nikaya, which means the numerical discourses. It's simply an arrangement of the Buddhist texts in a certain way. In it, the Buddha taught a series of reflections that can have a very powerful effect both in our formal meditation, but even more importantly, in how we live our everyday lives.

"Bhikkhus, there are these five themes that should often be reflected upon by a householder or one who has gone forth. What five? One, I am subject to old age. I am not exempt from old age. Two, I am subject to illness. I am not exempt from illness."

As you hear these reflections, is this true for you? Could you say this to yourself and really be connecting it to your experience? I am subject to illness. I am not exempt from illness. I am subject to death. I am not exempt from death. I must be parted from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me.

How often do we reflect on that? That one way or another we are going to be separated from everybody we love and everybody that's dear to us. And I am not exempt.

And finally: I am the owner of my karma. I am the owner, the heir, of my actions. I have karma, actions, as my origin, as my relative, as my resort. I will be the heir of whatever karma, actions, good or bad, that I do.

This is powerful. It's what I referred to in my talk the other night—the understanding that what we do matters. Our actions of body, speech, and mind bring about results. We are the heirs of our own actions and the motivations behind them.

So frequently practicing these recollections: I am subject to old age, I am not exempt. I am subject to illness, I am not exempt. I am subject to death, I am not exempt. I must be parted from everything I hold dear, and I am not exempt. I am the heir of my actions.

The Buddha is suggesting we reflect on these daily. They are a wake-up call to what is true. This is not something fanciful, and it's not some metaphysical proposition. The Buddha is pointing us to some very obvious truths of our lives, but ones that, for the most part, we don't really spend much time contemplating. Probably if you spoke to somebody not involved in some kind of practice like this, and you said you're contemplating old age, illness, and death, they would ask, "Why would you want to do that? That's morbid." But it's not morbid at all. We are connecting with what is true. Krishnamurti, the great Indian teacher, said, "It is the truth which liberates, not your efforts to be free." Our efforts are to see what is true, and in the realization, the seeing of what is true—that's what liberates us.

Now what's really strange—I've noticed this so much in my own mind, having done these reflections somewhat—I'm subject to illness and I'm not exempt. I've seen in myself so often when I'm feeling well and energetic, and then I begin to feel some scratchy throat or cold coming on or whatever, some illness, there very often is this moment of—I'm not sure whether indignation is too strong a word—but it comes out of the feeling that I am exempt. Why should this be happening to me? It's really striking how even though on one level we know this is just the nature of things, this is the Dharma, we still feel exempt. Yes, this is true for everybody else, but somehow I'm in a special category. Somewhere deep inside of us—at least in me—I can see that attitude. So the reflection, the recollection, keeps reminding us that we're not exempt, that this is true for all of us.

These reflections really are a wake-up call that can awaken us from the enchantment of thinking we are exempt, that somehow if we just get everything right we'll go through life without any of these things happening. No, that's just fantasy. And the reflections, the recollections, in doing them keep reminding us of that.

Let me share one other aspect of this non-exemption. One time I was teaching a retreat for environmental activists out in New Mexico at this beautiful wilderness ranch. On the last day of the retreat, we all went for a walk—it was way out in the wilderness, in the high mountains. We walked along the river that ran through the property. There were a lot of rocks, but it was beautiful, a fun hike. But on the way back, I slipped. It had rained, so the rocks were slippery, and I hyperextended my knee.

At the time, I managed to get back and wasn't too concerned. Then I was going to give the talk that night, and in those days I was still sitting cross-legged. Things have changed—not to my liking, but there it is. Before giving the talk, I thought, "You better

not sit cross-legged. You did something to your knee." But I overrode that thought. So I started giving an hour talk, and I couldn't get up at the end. I had to be carried back to my room. It was pretty embarrassing. I really had damaged my knee from doing that.

All night long my mind was just going over this whole thing—self-judgment, how could I have done that. I had a really busy teaching schedule. I was scheduled to go to Europe, and just a very busy summer was ahead of me, and I didn't know what I was going to do. There was a lot of agitation in my mind. Then at a certain point, sometime in the middle of the night, a certain mantra arose in my mind that put the whole thing in a helpful perspective. The phrase that came to mind was: anything can happen anytime.

Anything can happen anytime. Conditions are constantly changing and we don't have control over it. You might hear that and think such a thought might lead to a kind of defensiveness or paranoia—anything can happen anytime. But it was just the opposite. When that thought came to mind and I realized the truth of it, the heart and mind relaxed. Instead of blaming myself for it, or instead of thinking, "Oh, if only I had protected myself in a certain way, this wouldn't have happened," the understanding that anything can happen anytime—and does—actually allowed the heart to relax, to become non-defensive. Yes, this is just part of life. These things happen. And it made the whole situation, at least internally, tremendously more easeful.

In a very similar recollection, the Buddha offers a reflection that reminds us of the universality of these experiences. It wasn't just that I had done something stupid and then this happened. Anything can happen anytime, and this is true for all of us. This is what the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, what is subject to old age grows old. When this happens, the noble disciple reflects: I am not the only one for whom what is subject to old age grows old. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to illness falls ill. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to death dies. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to destruction is destroyed. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to loss is lost."

I find this just a very helpful reminder, because so often we personalize the difficulties we're going through, whatever they may be. Not only do we think, "This is only happening to me, why me?" but then we often blame ourselves in one way or another. We forget the universality of these truths—that this is the nature of having a mind and body, that this is what happens to everyone. We're all in the same boat with this.

So we really begin to understand that our life situations, whatever they may be—and we all have different conditions—are really not unique. We share so much. We are all part of this great matrix of life and death, creation and destruction. This big picture of what being alive entails. And when we take this big picture and see that it's universal, it really opens the possibility of relating to it in a wiser way, in a freer way.

So we come to realize both the aspect of not-self that is dukkha—that's the aspect where the elements lead to affliction, where it's not governable—and also an aspect of not-self that is freeing, that is ultimately freeing. This is why this realization of the Buddha's is so powerful for us. It's really the heart of what makes liberation possible.

We begin to understand this freeing aspect: that not a single element of this mind or body or experience in the world, not a single aspect of what arises, belongs to us. From the very beginning there is not a self to whom it could belong. This is a radically different way of understanding our life experience, because mostly in our lives everything refers back to me. I'm the one who's knowing it all. I'm the one who's experiencing it all. This is my body.

To have the understanding that nothing in our experience belongs to us, and that in fact there was never a self to whom it could belong—instead of referring everything back to me, we begin to experience life where all experience is arising and passing by itself, with no self-referential aspect to it. Experience is just what it is.

This has very important implications. Again, from the Buddha:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, people were to carry off the grass, the sticks, the branches and foliage of this Jeta Grove"—that was a grove offered to the Buddha for his retreats, for the monks and nuns to stay—"or to burn them or to do with them as they wish. As you saw this happening, would you think, 'People are carrying us off or burning us or doing with us as they wish'?"

"No, Venerable Sir, because that is neither our self nor belongs to our self."

So that part's pretty obvious. If people are taking things out of the forest and burning it or doing whatever, we wouldn't think that they're doing it to us. Why? Because we know that's certainly not self.

Here the Buddha makes this very radical assertion, which we need to verify for ourselves. He said: "So too, bhikkhus, form of the body, the material elements, is not yours. Feelings are not yours. Perception is not yours. Volitional formations are not yours. Consciousness is not yours. Abandon it, let go of clinging. When you have let go of clinging to what is not yours, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

Here we're getting to the heart of what not-self means in terms of relationship to our own life experience. The question is, given all these teachings about impermanence and the ungovernability of the elements and of non-self, why is the sense of self, the view of self, the concept of self so strong in us? If it's not true—and the Buddha is saying it's really a misperception, we're misperceiving things—if it's not true, why is it so universally and so deeply conditioned in us? How does this sense of self, this idea of self, arise?

When we observe the body, which most of us take to be who we are—this is me, this is my body—when we look at it more closely, not superficially, we see that what we're calling the body is a collection of different systems. There's the skeleton made of bones. There's the circulatory system with all the blood vessels. There's the nervous system with all the nerves running through the body, and the organs. When we begin to really look deeply at what the body is, we get a very different picture than our usual perception. Seen in this way, we probably would not say, "The gallbladder is me. I'm the gallbladder." Or, "I'm the liver." Unlikely.

Yet it's so strange. We wrap all of this up very nicely in skin and become entranced with the package. We're not looking to see what's inside. And so we become very attached to the body—not only to our own bodies, but to other people's bodies as well. But how attached would we be if we had x-ray vision? If we could really see what's underneath this very nice covering, we might not be so clingy.

And of course, the corollary of our attachment to the body—attachment to our own body—is the fear of losing it. Why do people have fear of death? Because of attachment to the body. We often have fear of our own death, or there's grief at the thought of losing the body of somebody we love or are attached to. There's grief at other people's death. Why? Because we're not seeing what the body really is. We're satisfied with this superficial perception.

If you look even deeper, on a cellular level or an atomic level, the body is mostly empty space. In all of the atoms, the amount of matter compared to the space between the atomic particles is minuscule. I read someplace—and I hope it's true because it's such a startling statement, and it sounds like it could be true; unfortunately, I don't remember the source, but it was in some scientific article—that all of the matter of the body, if condensed, would be no larger than a particle of dust.

I find that totally remarkable. Of all the atoms, the electrons and protons and subatomic particles which are incredibly small—if all of that were compressed, it wouldn't be any bigger than a particle of dust. So what is it that we're attached to? What is it here that we're calling self, this body? It's a particle of dust.

There's a strong sense of self when we're identified with our thoughts and emotions, with all the internal stories we tell about ourselves or others. One little exercise you could do—I've mentioned it in a few of my groups and found it really helpful. It's very clear by now how often we just get lost in long trains of thought. We're carried away in this whole internal movie, the internal drama with all kinds of attendant emotions. Then at a certain point we wake up from being lost.

Well, that also happens many, many times a day with quickly passing thoughts that are not big, not dramatic, not troublesome. Maybe a plan or a memory—something relatively innocuous—but the thought comes and for even a short period of time, maybe thirty seconds or a minute or two minutes, we're lost in the thought. Then we wake up and we're back, aware of whatever we're doing. This happens countless times a day, these quickly passing thoughts that go through the mind.

It's a great exercise just to set the intention as you move about during the day. This can be outside the times of formal meditation, where you simply watch out for those thoughts, so that we become more aware of all those moments when we're dropping into the dream of thought—which often has to do, in one way or another, with the sense of self. Maybe it's a plan for something we're going to do, or a memory of something we have done, or some comment we have. Very often the content of the thoughts are self-referential in one way or another. But because they're not particularly troublesome and they're quick, most of us don't pay much attention. We're just going through the day and the thoughts come and go. We're basically ignoring them.

It was very fruitful for me in my practice when I began to have the strong intention to keep an eye out for these thoughts. It was quite remarkable, because then you are really bringing the practice right into the midst of your daily life. You can see in all of those situations the difference between being lost in the dream of a thought and being awake, being aware. You'll have thousands upon thousands of opportunities every day to just notice that. So I would really urge you to begin making that experiment. It was very, very revealing.

We begin to see, as we become more aware—and I think you've probably already glimpsed this—as you notice in your practice throughout the day thoughts coming and going and emotions coming and going, that in seeing them, in being aware of them as they arise and seeing their impermanence, seeing how they just come and go, we begin to get genuine glimpses and realizations of thoughts not being self and emotions not being self. They're arising out of conditions. And the conditions change and the thought disappears.

So this is just a little description from the Tibetan tradition.

Thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds, having no roots, no home. I love that image of roots and home, because we often relate to the thoughts and emotions that arise as having roots. "I'm thinking this," or "I'm feeling this." So I like the image of just imagining a cloud in the sky with a root coming down, tethered to the ground. It's such a ridiculous image, but that's exactly what we're doing with these thoughts and emotions. They are really just like clouds in the sky—they are untethered. But we tether them by not being aware, not being mindful that they're there, and then identifying with them.

A thought comes, and our attitude about it is, "I'm thinking," or "I'm feeling this"—not seeing that this overlay of "I" and "mine" is extra. That's not in the thought itself. It's not in the emotion itself. What we're doing is tethering these internal experiences, giving them a root and anchoring them to some imaginary sense of self. We're adding the "I" and "mine" to it.

One thing that misleads us is that when we're looking at experience and what we're calling ourself, there is a recognizable pattern. I get up in the morning, look in the mirror—that's me. I'm seeing a certain image and it's recognizable, not too dissimilar from the day before. This gives rise to that sense of self, of me, of Joseph, because the pattern is recognizable. But when we look more deeply—it's like looking underneath the skin—when we look underneath the pattern, we begin to see that there is no I, no self, no Joseph behind it. It's not that there's a self to whom all these elements belong.

The thought is the thinker. The thought is thinking itself. It's not that there's an "I" who is having the thought. The thought is a mental phenomenon doing its own thing. The thought thinks. But we add to it: "I'm thinking," or "This is my thought." That's extra—that's not in the experience itself.

The same is true with emotions. It's love that loves. It's fear that fears. It's anger that angers. It's joy that joys. Life is a whole set of different conditions, internal and external, that give rise to these phenomena. Something is giving rise—there are causes and conditions for thoughts to come and emotions to come. It's just coming to the realization that they don't belong to anyone.

I hope you can get even just a glimmer of this possibility. This whole life process is empty phenomena—empty of self—empty phenomena rolling on, moment after moment. There are physical sensations arising and passing, thoughts coming and going, emotions coming and going. It's just this flow, this flow of impermanent, changing phenomena. And if we want to say the self is anything, we could say the self is the flow of changing phenomena. It's not a thing to whom experiences belong. It's like the current of a river—there's no river apart from the flowing water.

The most subtle aspect of this flow of appearances is this: even when we really do get a sense that the physical elements, the physical sensations, are just coming and going, that thoughts are coming and going, emotions are coming and going—even when we're beginning to glimpse this selfless nature, that they're arising out of conditions, that they don't belong to me, that we don't have to claim them—the most subtle aspect of our experience which gives rise to this strongly held view of self, common for most of us, is when we identify with consciousness.

The physical elements are pretty obvious, and even thoughts and emotions—we can see pretty clearly their impermanent, changing nature. But even after a lot of practice, we can still see how we're identifying with the knowing, and so create a knower. Knowing is part of the process, but we identify with that part of the process, and so we create the sense of an observer. We create the sense of a witness. "All of this is changing, but I'm the one knowing it all."

This is a place that takes a great deal of care and attention and subtlety to really cut through—the identification with consciousness, with knowing, with the knowing faculty. Tonight I'm going to finish because I can't leave it here. It's just too interesting. Through a growing awareness, we can begin to see and investigate how consciousness itself arises out of conditions.

It's arising and changing in each moment. Tomorrow morning I'm going to offer just a few suggestions and techniques for how to cut through this identification with knowing, because consciousness becomes the last holdout of self. It's so subtle. The other aspects of our experience, we begin to get a handle on. It's not easy, but it's not that difficult. But to actually become mindful of knowing, mindful of consciousness, mindful of awareness—mindful so that we don't identify with it, so that we see that this too is just an impersonal process—that takes very dedicated looking. I'll offer some suggestions for how to do this tomorrow.

First, I want to give one image which may help us understand the difference between our superficial perception of things and the deeper realization of what's actually there. If you go outside after a rainstorm, maybe the sun comes out and you see a rainbow. We all have this experience—it's pleasant, enjoyable, beautiful. "Oh, look at the rainbow in the sky." But if we look or investigate a little more carefully and just ask the question, "What is a rainbow? Is a rainbow something in and of itself?" No, it's an appearance that occurs when there's a certain combination of moisture and light and air. The conditions come together and a rainbow appears. But a rainbow is not something in itself. It's an appearance dependent on changing conditions.

Joseph, self, each one of you—is like a rainbow. There is an appearance. We're seeing what we see, so it's not denying that level. But it's a designation for an appearance, and we want to see what gives rise to the appearance. That is all of these changing elements which I described, none of which can be taken to be self—just as the air is not the rainbow, and the light is not the rainbow, and the moisture is not the rainbow. These are just the conditions which give rise to its appearance.

The Buddha gave a very straightforward and simple instruction to his son, Rahula. It would be good to practice with this. This is something the Buddha gave to his son as a vehicle for his awakening, his liberation. He said that every aspect of mind and body should be seen with perfect wisdom as it is: "This is not mine. This is not I. This is not myself." Just imagine applying that little mantra of understanding, that wisdom mantra, to every aspect of your experience, especially those where you see yourself getting caught. "This is not mine. This is not I. This is not myself." It's the reminder. It really becomes a mantra of liberation.

Now there's one very unexpected consequence of this deepening realization of selflessness. As we settle back into the freedom of that space of things just appearing and disappearing according to causes and conditions, and it's not referring back to anyone—what we're calling self is this flow of changing conditions, there's not a self behind it to whom it's happening—the more we understand that, there is a growing sense of connection, a growing sense of intimacy. Why? Because we realize that from the beginning, there was no one there to be separate. And in that understanding, we begin to appreciate that selflessness and love are the same thing. These are not two different things. They're just different ways of understanding it.

I'll end with this teaching from one of the great Tibetan masters, Kalu Rinpoche. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things." We live in the world of self, of I, of Joseph, of rainbow, of concepts. "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all."

This is really a profound realization. Often people hear about selflessness, not-self—"I'm not this, I'm not that"—and they get scared by it.

But it's like stepping out of a prison of contraction. When we realize this, we see that we are nothing—there's no self to whom things belong. But being nothing, we are everything. We settle into the totality of what is actually happening moment to moment. This is the great transformation of insight in our practice.

So let's sit for a few hours, since you're on a roll of extended attention.

Before I ring the bell, there's one more little teaching to end with, in case there was still some confusion about self and not-self. This is from a Tibetan teacher: "It's not that you are not real. You are real, but you think you're *really* real. You exaggerated."

So just remember that. Real, but not really real.

CHAPTER 43

# Cutting Through the Identification with Consciousness, the Knowing Mind

Joseph Goldstein · 58 min

> *In this profound talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of the subtlest attachments in meditation practice: identification with consciousness or awareness itself. He describes this as "the last hideout of self" and offers two complementary approaches for investigating the knowing mind without clinging to it.*
>
> *The first approach comes from classical Theravāda vipassanā practice: recognizing that in every moment, experience consists of a "pairwise progression" of object and knowing. Sound arises with the knowing of sound; sensation arises with the knowing of sensation. These two aspects are distinct but inseparable—like color and shape in a visual object. Through careful attention to this process, practitioners can see that consciousness itself arises and passes with each object, revealing its impermanent and impersonal nature. This insight constitutes the stage called "purification of view" (diṭṭhi-visuddhi), foundational to the unfolding vipassanā path.*
>
> *The second approach draws from Zen and Tibetan traditions, illustrated through the famous dialogue between Bodhidharma and his student. When asked to pacify his suffering mind, the student searches for the mind but cannot find it—and in this non-findability, the mind is already pacified. Joseph encourages practitioners to investigate: when hearing a sound, can you find what is knowing it? There is nothing to find, yet the knowing is happening. This recognition naturally cuts through identification. The talk concludes with an essential teaching on the two levels of truth—conventional and ultimate—and how understanding selflessness doesn't negate ordinary functioning but rather frees us from clinging. As the Buddha taught: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine."*

Last night I talked a little bit about how identification with consciousness or with awareness can become the last hideout of self. And so in one way or another we want to begin the investigation of how to be mindful of the knowing, mindful of awareness, of consciousness, without identifying with it—allowing it to fulfill its function of cognizing and realizing that this aspect of experience, the knowing mind, also arises out of conditions, is not I, is not mine, is not self.

So the question is: how can we begin to get a glimpse of how to become mindful of this essential part of our experience, the knowing mind? To get a glimpse of how we might become mindful of it in a way in which we're cutting through the identification.

The different Buddhist traditions have different techniques for this. Within the range of the Buddhist traditions there are many philosophical differences and differences of methodology. But the point of all the teachings, in whatever form or method is used, is to see the selfless nature, to realize the selfless nature of whatever's arising.

There are two approaches that I want to mention now.

One of the most classical approaches to becoming mindful of the knowing, mindful of consciousness, is to realize that in every moment two things are happening: there's an object and the knowing of the object. We hear a sound—there's the sound, which is physical matter, and then the knowing of the sound, which is consciousness. There's a movement and the knowing of the movement. A sensation and the knowing of the sensation. Our experience is this pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

We want to go from the more conventional way of interpreting experience—"I'm hearing a sound," or "I'm thinking a thought," or "I'm feeling a sensation"—that's our usual conventional description. But the more meditative understanding would be to experience each moment as simply being this pair. Sound arises, there's a knowing of it. Thought arises, knowing of it. It's very simple. It's what's actually happening moment to moment, but we're framing it in this way and really experiencing in this way.

When we begin to frame experience in terms of this momentary knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object—as we get very clear that that's what's happening moment to moment—then gradually it becomes intuitively obvious that the knowing itself is arising and passing with each object. There's knowing an object arising and passing, knowing an object arising and passing, knowing an object arising and passing. We're beginning to get a taste, at least, of the fact that consciousness itself is part of this impersonal process arising and passing.

As you're sitting, you want to investigate this in a non-obsessive way. We're talking about really getting to the heart of where we are most subtly caught up. If it's of interest to you, just begin to look at this and play around with this framework of understanding. It may be that at times you'll get just a hit or a sense: "Oh yeah, this is how things are happening."

For example, in the sitting, if you're feeling the breath at the abdomen, there's a rising movement. And right along with the rising, simultaneous, is the knowing of it. If it were a corpse having its stomach pumped, the rising would be there, but there's no

knowing. So there's the movement—this is just physical, just material elements. But along with this, there is a knowing. The falling—that's just the physical elements. But along with it is the knowing.

One thing to keep in mind is that as you're paying attention to this, there's nothing you have to do. This doesn't have to be created. This is how it's happening. It's just settling back and observing that this is how it's happening.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the knowing and the object are distinct but not separable. It's not that you should be looking for some space where the knowing is over here and the object is over here. It's not like that. It's a unity. It's arising as a unity—two different aspects arising together but distinct.

I'll give you an example. If you just look at this, we can be seeing or emphasizing the awareness either of the color or the form, the shape. Shape and color are two different things.

They're two different aspects. Shape is not color, and color is not shape. And yet they're not separable. The shape is in a color, and the color has a shape. So these two are not separable, but they are distinct. Is that clear?

It's the same way with knowing and the object. It's just like color and form, color and shape. They're arising together, they can't be separated, but there are two distinct aspects. One is the material elements, which don't know anything—it's just physical matter. And simultaneously, inseparably, in each moment of arising, is the knowing of it.

So it's really quite simple, but it takes some settling into this particular perspective. There's the rising, falling, or in and out, the breath coming in—that's just the physical sensations. Simultaneous with the in-breath is the knowing. Simultaneous with the out-breath is the knowing.

This is one way of beginning to understand the process without adding the sense of I or me or mine to it. The knowing itself becomes part of the unfolding process. In one of the early stages of vipassanā insight, there is a stage called purification of view, which is where we begin to get a clearer sense of how this process is actually unfolding. It's this insight that in every moment there is the knowing and an object—this pairwise progression arising and passing, arising and passing—and that's all that's happening. The sense of I or mine is extra; that's an overlay. So this insight is really, in a way, the beginning of the whole vipassanā path unfolding.

That's one approach, which you could play with and just see if you can connect with it in some way or other.

The other approach comes more from the Zen or Tibetan tradition, in terms of cutting the identification with knowing. It's best illustrated by a little Zen story, quite well known, of a student coming to see Bodhidharma, the person who brought Buddhism from India to China. This disciple comes and says, "I'm suffering a lot. Can you please pacify my mind?" Bodhidharma, who had been sitting in his cave for seven years or nine years or something, comes out. At first he's reluctant to give the teachings, but the disciple is insistent: "Please teach me. My mind is suffering so much. Please, please pacify it."

As the dialogue is expressed, Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind, and I'll pacify it."

Now, as you listen to this, really, there's a profound teaching here, so let it go in. Show me your mind, and I'll pacify it.

And the disciple says, "I've looked for it everywhere, and I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There—it's already pacified."

It's in the non-findability of consciousness, the non-findability of awareness, that automatically cuts through any identification with it. As one Tibetan teacher said, when you look for the mind, there's nothing to find. And the not finding is the finding. That's the insight to extract. When we look for the mind, there's nothing to find. It's not a thing. Expressed in another way, another text says the mind is, but it doesn't exist. We can't find it as an object. It's empty in that sense. There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening. That's the great mystery of awareness, of consciousness.

When you're sitting, this is something I've found very interesting to do in practice. I find it most easy to do, at least at first, with sound. When sound arises, the sound is known—we're hearing the sound. Occasionally you might just ask, or look: Can I find what is knowing the sound? In the experience of hearing, it's obvious that we're knowing the sound, because we're actually hearing it. In that moment of knowing the sound, it's like turning the attention with the question: Can I find what it is that's knowing it?

This is where it gets interesting. When we look, when we try to find what's knowing it, there's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening. If you just have moments of looking at the mind, there's nothing to find—just see if you get some sense of that, some taste of it. Because in the not finding of knowing or consciousness as a thing, it cuts through the tendency to identify with it. There's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening. That's the mystery and the challenge of this inquiry.

Just settle back. Get grounded in the awareness of the body. Continue your practice as you've been doing it.

Perhaps from time to time, just investigate your experience in terms of this pairwise progression—moment after moment, knowing and object, knowing and object, arising simultaneously. And if it's of interest, at some point you could experiment. Again, especially with sound, but it could be anything. With whatever the experience is, can you find what's knowing it?

*Question from participant about whether the identification with "I" and "me" is innate or socially conditioned, and what would happen if one were raised in isolation.*

The comment was about this addition of "I," "me," and "mine" to experience, and how that is very conditioned by society and how we're brought up. The question was: what would happen if one were brought up in isolation without that conditioning? Would the mind just be resting in natural awareness?

Given the Buddhist understanding of birth and death and rebirth—which you may or may not believe at this point—but as my first teacher Munindra would say, when he was talking about rebirth and the different realms of existence to Westerners, knowing that many were skeptical, he would say, "You don't have to believe it. It's true, but you don't have to believe it."

So given that framework, as Trungpa Rinpoche said when asked, "What is it that's reborn?" He replied, "Your neuroses." It's not that we come in with a pure blank slate. The very reason, the very cause within the Buddhist cosmological understanding—the very cause of rebirth—is craving and attachment. We're coming in with that. And again, it's over countless lifetimes that this conditioning has been built up.

*Another question about knowing and experience, and whether accumulated experience constitutes identity.*

I think one of the places people get caught up has to do with exploring and integrating the notion of two levels of truth: the relative level and what you could call the more ultimate level.

On the relative level—the conventional, ordinary way we relate to experience—there's "I," there's self, there's other. When we're doing metta meditation, we're not saying, "May the five aggregates which are arising in you be expressive of loving-kindness towards other five aggregates." That whole understanding of selflessness—that it's just

the play of the aggregates, that it's impersonal—that's on one level. On another level, the relative level, here's Joseph, there's you. We relate with Joseph as a certain identity with a certain history of experience. These two levels are happening together.

Let me see if I can do a show and tell here. What do you see? A tissue box? Actually, we don't see a tissue box. The eye does not see "tissue box." The eye sees color and form, and then the mind puts a concept on what we're seeing—"tissue box."

On the basic level of seeing, of just color and form, if we were really paying careful attention, we would see the flow of impermanence in that. But as soon as we put the concept "tissue box" on it, the concept remains the same. Tissue box today, tissue box yesterday, tissue box tomorrow. Even if we know that it's just seeing color and form—or to put it another way, if we could see microscopically, there'd be no tissue box, just atoms and electrons—it would be a whole other level of reality where tissue box disappears.

The fact that it's possible to see an underlying level of reality, the tissue box-less reality of this, doesn't mean that we also don't relate to it on the relative level of tissue box. It's here, and if I need a tissue, I'll reach down and take one.

So these two levels are not mutually exclusive. There is the conventional, relative level of self, of other, of identity—all of that is part of how we live in the world. But in underlying reality, you could say at the subatomic particle level, there is the selfless nature of it. The more we tune into that level as well, the less attachment there is to the conventional level. We operate in the world with ordinary concepts, but if we have insight into the underlying reality, then we're not caught by the relative level.

*Question: I'm trying to understand the "so what" of all this. We're all here to try to figure out how to live better lives. Impermanence, all that dukkha—it's always been tricky for me, but you've done a great job today and yesterday of explaining it in a way I've never thought about before. From yesterday's teaching, my takeaway is: don't take it so personally, it's not about you, get over yourself. But what are we to take from this whole separation of the known—*

It's not the separation, it's the distinction.

*—how do we take that lesson and apply it to our lives?*

The "so what" of beginning to be with experience in this frame—this more ultimate frame, not the conventional one—is really seeing that all that's there in each moment is this process of an object arising, one of the six sense objects being known.

Now, many of you may think, in the course of the week or the nine days, that your mind and your life are quite complicated. But it really isn't, because only six things ever happen. Everything that we think of as a great big complicated life—it's only six things. It's either seeing, or hearing, or smelling, or tasting, or feeling a sensation in the body, or some mind object of thought or emotion. The five senses and the mind.

When we really drop into the experience, the flow of experience moment after moment, we see it's only these six things in different combinations happening very rapidly. We put it all together like the frames of a film going very quickly—we don't see that they're just separate frames. And so a whole story is created because we haven't really seen carefully the nature of this process of what we call our lives. It's only these six things, ever.

But if we're not paying very careful attention to that process, we experience those six things in different patterns, and they create a whole story, and then we're living in the story of our lives with all the attendant joys and sorrows and complications.

So the "so what" of beginning to see this experience—what we're calling "Joseph" or "life"—seeing it in this way enables us to drop back into experience with much greater ease and simplicity. And then, as different thoughts and emotions arise, we've talked about this a little: to see that the thought is essentially empty, there's not much power in the thought. The only power is the power we give it.

The same thing with emotions. Emotions are powerful, vivid experiences. Can we be with them just as they are, seeing the conditioned, impermanent nature of them? Or are we collapsing into the story of them?

The more we see the emptiness, the selflessness of the process, the more it enables us to be with experience and, on a relative level, discern which of these experiences are worth cultivating. Which thoughts should I follow? Which emotions should I cultivate? Which thoughts should I let go of? Which emotions are not that skillful and can be abandoned?

If we hold the belief that each one of these experiences is who I am, then it's a problem, because there's a mix of wholesome and unwholesome. If we're identifying with all of that, beginning to see the unwholesome aspects can so easily lead to self-judgment and guilt—"I'm such a terrible person." This was certainly my experience in the very beginning of my practice. I saw the whole range of my mind until I began to see more deeply: that's all empty, it's all selfless. And that understanding gave the space then to discern which experiences to respond to, which simply to let go of.

So it provides that greater space and ease with which to engage in the world.

*Question: I often think of the brain as a receptor, with this communication constantly flowing back and forth. I can never move beyond this idea of my brain as a receptor of information, giving information back and forth. I often see my body as just this antenna.*

This is a totally reasonable question, especially given our scientific paradigm for understanding life and the world. Just a couple of things.

If you're proceeding with the belief that brain and mind are the same thing, you could mostly come to the same understanding of selflessness—as long as you don't assume it's *your* brain, that there is a brain doing these things. So even within that context, it's possible to understand the selfless nature of it all. It's all an impersonal process.

From the Buddhist perspective, there is a distinction between mind and brain, and the brain becomes the physical basis for consciousness to arise. For example, thought is immaterial—it's not a material object, it's mental. But it arises out of certain electrical impulses in the brain. The thought is not the electrical impulse; the electrical impulse is the condition for the thought to arise. You could work with it in both of these ways, and in either case, in whatever way you're holding it, you can still be seeing the impermanent, selfless nature of it all.

The purpose of the practice is not necessarily to create some new philosophic or metaphysical system—that's not the purpose. The purpose is to see things in such a way that deconditions grasping, deconditions clinging. The cause of suffering in our lives, in the most fundamental way, is clinging or craving for things, for experiences in this whole unfolding process—craving or clinging to things which in their very nature are going to change. Because of that, if we're attached, we suffer. If we're attached to youth, we suffer in old age. If we're attached to summer, we suffer in winter. If we're attached to things staying this way, we suffer when they change.

The freedom lies in just being in the process—sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant. It doesn't mean everything always becomes pleasant, but the mind is free in the experience of both because we're not identifying, we're not adding that extra layer, we're not clinging, we're not attached. That's the essence of it. Even within Buddhism, the different traditions have different metaphysical systems describing it all, but it all comes down to the mind that does not cling. That's where the freedom is.

The practice and all the suggestions of method and philosophy and Buddhist teaching—they're all directed toward that point. It was expressed in one sutta where the Buddha says, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine." Whoever practices this practices all of the teachings. It all comes down to that point.

CHAPTER 44

# Desire and Its End

Joseph Goldstein · 58 min

> *In this profound talk from an insight meditation retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses the ultimate aim of the Buddhist path—the end of craving—and how practitioners can taste this freedom even at the beginning of their journey. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings, he explores the Pāli term taṇhā (thirst or craving), described as "the fever of unsatisfied longing," which the Buddha identified as the primary fetter keeping beings bound to saṃsāra.*
>
> *Goldstein examines two primary arenas of craving: desire for sense pleasures (kāma-taṇhā) and craving for becoming (bhava-taṇhā). He presents the Buddha's analytical framework for investigating sense pleasures—acknowledging their genuine gratification while recognizing their drawbacks (ādīnava): impermanence, unreliability, and the potential for unwholesome actions when craving becomes obsessive. The teaching "Lust cracks the brain" from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita captures how powerful desires can lead to harmful actions.*
>
> *The more subtle craving for becoming manifests as the obsessively planning mind, constant expectation, comparing ourselves to others, and the pervasive feeling of rushing—living "a short distance from the body." Goldstein distinguishes between wholesome aspiration, which inspires us, and expectation, which leads to agitation through hope and fear. He offers the Buddha's instruction: "Not reviving the past, not hoping to be in the future. Instead, with insight, see each arising state." The talk concludes with the Buddha's words upon enlightenment: "Realized is the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving"—pointing to the liberation available through letting go in each moment.*

Although we're still toward the beginning of the retreat, this evening I'd like to talk about the end of the whole path—where it's going—and how we can actually taste the fruition of the path all along the way. It's possible to touch or taste the peace and freedom that comes in the fulfillment of the path.

The French philosopher, political activist, and mystic Simone Weil wrote, "What people are looking for is not wrong, but they are looking for it in the wrong place." When I read that, it resonated so deeply with me and my understanding of the work we're all doing. Although we may call it by different names—peace or awakening or enlightenment, even love—really what we're all looking for is happiness, some deep abiding fulfillment and completion. The problem, though, is that mostly people are looking for this kind of happiness in the wrong place, misdirected.

This problem is highlighted in one of the teaching stories of Mullah Nasruddin, the Sufi teaching figure who is a combination of wise man, mad man, and fool. There are lots of stories, and you'll probably recognize this one—it's quite well known. Mullah Nasruddin was scrounging around under a lamppost looking for something. Some friends came along and said, "What are you looking for?" He said, "I lost the key to my house." They said, "Where did you lose it?" He said, "In the house." So they said, "Why are you looking under the lamppost?" He said, "Because there's more light here."

It's just this misdirected craving and desire for happiness. We're looking in the wrong place. We're looking in the places that society tells us to look or our conditioning tells us to look, but it's not really where happiness is to be found.

These are some words from the Buddha. When he was addressing the monks in his teaching, he would refer to them as bhikkhus. But bhikkhus also has a much wider meaning than just monk. In its broader meaning, it refers to everyone on the path to awakening, everyone on the path to enlightenment. In that sense, we're all bhikkhus, and it would be helpful when we hear the words of the Buddha to listen to them as if he's speaking directly to us—as if he's really addressing us.

He said, "Bhikkhus, I do not envision even one other fetter, fettered by which beings go wandering and transmigrating for a long, long time, like the fetter of craving."

The Buddha is being very specific here about that quality of the mind, that binding quality, that keeps us bound to this whole long samsaric journey. So what is craving, and how do we experience it in our lives?

Craving or desire is the translation in English of the Pali word tanha. The root meaning of tanha is thirst. Sometimes it was expressed as the fever of unsatisfied longing. I like those other translations because when we think of thirst, or the fever of longing that's unsatisfied, it gives us a very visceral sense of what craving is like—a very visceral sense of the feeling when the mind is filled with craving.

In English, we often use the words craving and desire to mean the same thing, but this can be a little confusing because desire has a wide range of meanings. We use that term in many different ways. One meaning of desire is this desire of craving—the thirst, the fever of unsatisfied longing. It's rooted in greed and attachment. But sometimes desire simply means the motivation to do something, the motivation to accomplish something. We could say we have a desire for enlightenment, or a desire to become more compassionate, or a desire for service. This is a very different mind state than the mind state of craving.

This evening I'm going to be using these two terms—desire and craving—interchangeably, but keep in mind that in other contexts, desire can mean many other things. Don't get confused by my limiting the meaning of desire in this evening's talk.

The Buddha pointed out some very particular fields or arenas of craving that misdirect us from the happiness we're all looking for. Tonight I'd like to explore two of these arenas of craving, because if we want to free ourselves from the grip of this fever, we have to understand where to look, where to examine, where to investigate.

Two of the fields of craving that the Buddha highlighted are the craving for sense pleasures and what he called the craving for becoming. The desire for sense pleasures is the most obvious, and it's the one we're really most familiar with. This desire is for pleasant sights, pleasant sounds, smells, tastes, and pleasant sensations in the body.

We could also include pleasant mind states. In Buddhism, often the mind is considered the sixth sense, alongside the five physical senses. So craving for sense pleasures is this desire to experience all of these different pleasant sense objects.

What makes this so interesting to me is that our engagement with desire for sense pleasures is just our usual engagement with life, with the world—enjoying and wanting what's pleasurable and trying to avoid as best as possible what's unpleasant or disagreeable. It seems so natural, so normal. This is just how we're living. And it is, in a way, normal and natural.

But right here is where the Buddha begins a very revealing analysis of this whole situation—the situation of being enmeshed in the world of sense pleasures. He didn't condemn them as being sinful. Rather, in his very scientific methodology for investigating experience and the mind, he was led to ask some very basic questions about these kinds of experiences.

The first question he asked was: What is the gratification in the world? This is a fundamental question. We're living in the world, engaged in the world. What is the gratification in the world?

As a young prince, before he left home on his quest for enlightenment, he thoroughly enjoyed all the various strands of sense pleasures. There are very elaborate descriptions of all the ways he was enjoying himself. So these pleasures were not foreign to him. This was not outside his realm of experience.

Then, as it's told in the suttas—sutta is the Pali word for discourse—the thought came to him: whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, that is the gratification in the world. He was talking about the gratification of joy and pleasure. If there were no pleasure and joy in the world, beings would not become enamored of it.

We're beginning to see something here. Why do we become enamored? Because we're gratified. It is gratifying to experience the joys and pleasures of life. It's precisely because there is joy, precisely because there is pleasure in this realm, that we desire and crave these sense pleasures. If they weren't enjoyable, we wouldn't be craving them. So that's part of our experience, part of the reality.

But rather than simply listening to the Buddha's words about this, it's always helpful to take the words and apply them to our own lives—to ask ourselves the same questions that the Bodhisattva, the Buddha before his enlightenment, asked of himself. An interesting exploration would be to consider, to reflect, for each one of us: What is the gratification in our lives? What different experiences of body and mind do we become enamored of, that we want, that we desire?

When we look both in ourselves and in the world around us, we see that our cravings and gratifications seem to come in a very wide range of intensities and frequency. On one end of the spectrum, there might be obsessive cravings that totally consume our lives. Perhaps we've gone through periods of this ourselves, or we see it in others, where the mind becomes obsessed with a particular craving. This might include things like addictions to food, or to sex, or to alcohol, or to drugs, or to success, or to power, or fame, or wealth, or possessions, or comfort, or even love.

When the mind becomes obsessive in its craving, we really want to understand that fever of unsatisfied longing. We see, when it's on that obsessive level, how damaging it is. A good part of the world's great literature is precisely about these very human passions. This was certainly not limited to the Buddha's time, and it's not limited to any small subset of people. These are universal, strong driving forces in people's lives.

In many ways, this Western culture is just feeding that. There are two advertisements over the years which really have jumped out at me. One was in a storefront in New York—just a sign that said, "Don't let desire pass you by." Another one, from the days when cigarette ads were still in magazines, featured a very handsome and beautiful couple with cigarettes in their hands, and the caption was, "I don't let anything stand in the way of my pleasure."

These are the messages we've been getting throughout our lives. Don't let desire pass you by.

We may not be totally consumed by them, but still they may be a driving force for many of the actions in our lives. So it's illuminating just to pay attention to the various things we crave as we go through our lives, not to simply remain caught in the habitual momentum of it. And this is the great power of mindfulness. As we learn to pay attention to what's going on here on retreat and in our lives, we can begin to see and notice, "Oh, this is where the craving starts to arise."

We can also watch desires that may not be obsessive and may not even be powerful forces in our lives. I've noticed in a very interesting way that sometimes desires arise simply as quick, light, passing thoughts in the mind. And it's interesting to see how even a light passing thought can be deeply rooted.

I'll give you an example. I was on retreat—and this has happened more than once—but I'm thinking of one particular time. I was doing walking meditation, and the thought came to my mind, "Oh, a cup of tea, that would be nice." And I noted it: "wanting, wanting." Took a few more steps. "Oh, a cup of tea." Noted: "wanting, wanting." Cup of tea. Wanting, wanting. I must have noted it ten times and then went for the cup of tea. You sometimes see how a tiny little blade of grass can push through cement. So the craving or the desire can be a very small, even trivial or insignificant thing. But the power of craving, the power of desire is very deeply rooted in our minds. It's almost like a primal energy in us.

It's also interesting to watch how seemingly trivial, momentary desires can sometimes, through repetition, strengthen into strong habits. At first it may just be a passing thought, but with repetition, it becomes more than a quickly passing thought, and we go from "I want this" to "I need this" to "I must have this."

So again, retreats are a great time to expand one's repertoire of stories because our minds are so entertaining if we're watching. I was in the habit, as maybe many of you are, that every morning I really look forward to that first cup of coffee. It kind of gets the day going. So I was doing a self-retreat at my home, and every morning I would get up and, you know, it's a real sense pleasure. Then one morning I got up and the coffee grinder didn't work. The first word that came into my mind—it's almost embarrassing to say this—the coffee grinder doesn't work, and the first word that comes to my mind is "disaster." And I meant it. I wasn't making fun of myself. It felt like a disaster. Now, in the realm of human disasters, this doesn't quite rank. But that's what our mind does. One yogi in an interview quite a few years ago came in and was sharing that great discovery and phrased it beautifully: "The mind has no pride. It'll do anything, it'll say anything." But it is helpful to have a sense of humor about it all.

Now, with all these different patterns of craving—whether it's the obsessive kind, or a little less than obsessive but still pretty demanding, or just momentary thoughts that become habits—all these different realms of craving and desire are so familiar to us that they're mostly invisible. We just take it to be who we are and how life is. This is normal, and we're not paying attention to it because it's so much part of who we take ourselves to be. Until we bring the power of mindfulness, the power of awareness, to this deeply conditioned pattern in all of us.

That's why the Buddha highlighted that he didn't see any other fetter as strong as craving that binds us to this wheel of samsara. So we want to take those words to heart. This is something that's really important to look at in our lives. And the retreat environment is very conducive to doing this.

We can start by really examining, really paying attention, to the first thing the Buddha mentioned: seeing the gratification that we feel in the enjoyment of different sense pleasures. So just as an experiment, you might notice during the day: What little experiences give you moments of delight? What do you become enamored of? For me, it was that early morning coffee.

Maybe it's the lunch meal, or a cup of tea, or a hot shower. Do you ever notice, when you get into a hot shower, just how pleasant it is? Or that very delectable moment—this is probably the highlight of the day—when you finally lie down at night in your bed after a long day, and the body just relaxes. It's a sense delight, a sense pleasure.

So it would be very interesting and instructive to notice the pleasure that's associated with all these experiences, and then to look: is there a subtle level of craving in the mind for them? This is a chance for us to explore, a chance for us to investigate in real time—not as an abstraction or theoretically, but really seeing it in those moments of enjoyment. Is there craving there, even on a subtle level?

One place where I saw this, again on retreat, was simply doing walking meditation. Very settled back in my body, just being aware of the movement—the lifting, the moving forward, the placing. Very still, very mindful. And then the lunch bell rings. I noticed that I could be walking just as slowly, but I could feel myself being pulled toward the lunchroom. Just this kind of subtle anticipation of enjoyment. This is the level I'm talking about on retreat. The beauty of retreat is that you have nothing else to do. You have no other job. And so you can really devote yourself to this very subtle inquiry of how these forces are working in us. Because out in the world, in the busyness of our activities, it's hard to be quiet enough and still enough to really see all this clearly.

We can also investigate the same conditioning in the enjoyment we have of pleasant fantasies in the mind. It's not only the physical pleasures, but really watching the same process at work in the mind. It's not uncommon at all—probably pretty universal at one time or another—to get carried away by enticing sexual fantasies, or food desires, or fantasies about relationships, like Bonnie was talking about the other night, the Vipassana romance. It's all just creations in our own mind. But it's so easy to get caught up and carried away by pleasant thought forms, pleasant fantasies.

At some point, as we investigate this and explore this realm of craving for sense pleasures, we might resonate with the Buddha's words when he said, "Whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found." I think this is really important. Are we still looking for some new hit, some new taste, some new sensation, some new thought? Or do we realize, yes, we've already experienced the gratification in the world? We've all had innumerable pleasurable experiences in the body, in the mind. Whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found.

But the Buddha did not stop here. This was just the first step of becoming aware of the ground of our lives—this desire for sense pleasures and the gratification that comes from them. He then went on in his exploration. He said, "Because I then set out seeking the dangers of the world."

"Danger" here is a translation of the Pali word *adinava*. This might also be translated more colloquially as "the drawbacks" of things, or the downside, the disadvantages. There are very few things that have just an upside to them. But the Buddha is particularly pointing out and encouraging the investigation: what is the downside or the drawbacks of gratification in the world?

He continued, "Whatever dangers or downsides there are in the world, that I have also found. Namely, that the world is impermanent and because of that, ultimately unreliable, subject to change."

We all know this conceptually. We could probably go up to anybody on the street in any town in America and ask them, "Do things change?" This is not an esoteric truth. Probably everybody would say yes, things change. But we're not living it. Because if we really were living it, if we really understood it deeply, we wouldn't get attached to things. We would know that whatever we're attached to, whatever we're craving, is going to change. And that's the drawback. That's the downside.

But how many of us, in times when things are going well, in times of good fortune when we're enjoying various pleasures—as we often are, for many of us, perhaps most of us—

We lead pretty privileged lives, given what occurs in so many parts of the world. But even if we have difficulties in our lives, still there are many times when we are enjoying things, enjoying the pleasures. How many of us have the interest, and even the courage, to really ask the question of ourselves: in the midst of this enjoyment, even as we're enjoying, what is the downside? What is the drawback?

There are several ways of understanding the drawbacks of sense pleasures. It's good to become aware of them and reflect on them so we can integrate that understanding into the choices we make.

First, we can reflect on the fact that in the end, sense pleasures do not deliver on their promise of happiness. We're enamored of them because we think they're going to make us happy. But the happiness from sense pleasures comes because of the pleasant feelings associated with them, and they do bring happiness for a short period of time—it's not to deny that. They do bring us a kind of joy and happiness. But precisely because they're so impermanent, so changeable, they're like bubbles in a stream. We have these moments of enjoyment and the happiness that may come from that, and then it's gone.

How many sense pleasures have you already enjoyed in your lives? Innumerable. But they're continually changing, continually disappearing, and so we go after another one and another one and another one, always anticipating the next. And all too soon, our lives are at an end. We go chasing after the illusory happiness of these sense pleasures, and unless we start paying attention to the downside, to the drawbacks, we are just living in that forward momentum of desire and craving without ever coming to a place of completion, to a place of real peace, to a place of real contentment.

So how much of our lives and energy do we want to spend in this endless pursuit? This is a meaningful question for all of us in how we're choosing to live our lives.

Now, as laypeople—I don't think there are any monastics here, mostly laypeople—we are living in the world engaged with all kinds of sense pleasures. This is our life, and there's nothing at all wrong with that. But still, some deep part of us, of each one of us, already knows on some deep level that it's not going to bring the fulfillment we're looking for. And it's clear that you understand this, because you decided to come here for this week rather than go to a beach in the Caribbean. So we want to honor that understanding that's already within us. We have a certain level of understanding and wisdom with regard to this, and it's good to reflect on that and honor it.

So the first drawback of relying on the gratification of sense desires for our genuine happiness is that it doesn't actually accomplish our aims. It's good to really let that in.

The second danger is that when craving becomes a strong or obsessive force in the mind, it often leads us to very unwholesome actions, creating the unwholesome karma that brings a lot of suffering to ourselves and others.

One time Sayadaw U Pandita, one of my Burmese teachers, was giving this talk on sense desires—just this whole discourse. He went on and on and on, all in translation. He was talking in Burmese, and he must have talked for about ten minutes. Then the translator translated the entire ten-minute discourse in four words: "Lust cracks the brain."

It is absolutely true. I'm sure you can all think of times when the mind was filled with lust for something, whether sexual lust or lust for anything—we go crazy. How many really harmful acts have taken place, harm to others, because of this force? Lust does crack the brain. We want to pay attention to this. This is a powerful force in the mind and in our lives. We have to take responsibility for it, to learn how to engage with the gratification of different sense pleasures in a careful, responsible way.

It takes a lot of interest and sometimes courage for us to really look deeply into our hearts, into our minds, to see these patterns—so that we're not just going through our lives on the momentum of habitual conditioning. We've all been conditioned in so many different ways, some of which are wholesome but some of which are not so wholesome. The only way to become free in the midst of all this is if we become aware, if we really see in our minds: this is leading to a good result, or this is not so skillful, this is not wholesome. It takes interest—we have to be interested in doing that—and sometimes it's challenging to really see our own patterns in this very deep way.

So I've talked a lot about this first arena of craving: the desire for sense pleasures, the gratification that comes from it that's real. There is a gratification, but also there's the examination of the drawbacks or the downside, so we come to a balanced experience of them.

The second type of craving is more subtle. Desire for sense pleasures, in one way, is quite obvious to us. But the second kind of craving mostly goes unnoticed. This is what the Buddha called craving for becoming.

The basic urge or desire to become this or that.

We can experience this craving in some very specific ways. One familiar pattern is the obsessively planning mind. Have you ever gotten caught up in endless planning? Imagining yourself in some future situation, then engaging in all the thoughts and actions that will get you there? Just notice—being on retreat and watching your minds in such a systematic way, you'll see many examples of this, of how often we get lost in

mind creations of a future self. A lot. A good part of our mental activity is just that: the desire for becoming, the craving for becoming, whatever it may be. I'll do this, I'll go there, I'll become this. Being lost in all these thought fantasies about our future is exactly this kind of craving for becoming.

Keep in mind that this is very different from mindfully planning for things that need to be done. I'm not suggesting that all planning is unskillful. In our lives we do need to plan. But there's a big difference between being lost in future fantasy and being grounded in the moment—really embodied and grounded, knowing, "Yes, this needs to be done, I'll plan for it," while doing it from a place of groundedness in the here and now. We're not lost in some mind fantasy.

Another way of experiencing this energy, this craving for becoming, is noticing the many times that expectation arises in the mind. One of the biggest hindrances in meditation practice, as well as in our lives, is being caught up in expectation. Expectation can happen on many levels. It can be a kind of distant expectation, but on a more subtle and pervasive level, expectation can be happening moment to moment.

This is something to really investigate for yourselves, because it's a very common experience in meditation that mostly goes unnoticed. As we're meditating and simply being with our experience moment after moment, notice how frequently—and it's probably the norm—the mind is with this moment but leaning into the next, energetically. It's a subtle pattern: we're with this breath in order to get to the next breath, or we're with this sensation in order for it to become something. It's very common, as if the next moment somehow is going to resolve everything. We forget that the next moment is just as impermanent as this moment. It's not going to offer any resolution of anything. But we're so habituated to this craving for becoming—this, in order for this, in order for that—and that's what keeps us caught.

The problem with expectation—and there are many problems with it—is that it inevitably brings agitation to the mind. This would really be helpful for you to observe. But what makes certain kinds of expectations, especially on retreat, so seductive is that they often come masquerading as Dharma aspirations. We think, "Well, I should be leaning into this because it's meant to accomplish some noble experience."

Here's something for you to parse clearly: the difference between aspiration and expectation. Aspirations can inspire us. We have an aspiration for awakening. We have an aspiration to become more compassionate. Aspiration sets a direction for us. Aspirations can be beautiful and ennobling. Expectation, however, leads us into the agitation of hope and fear. We get tossed about by those two polarities. When there's expectation,

we're hoping it will happen and fearing that it won't. We go back and forth. That mindset is a very different experience than aspiration. It will be very helpful for you to get clear about that difference so you don't confuse them.

So the next time you feel frustrated in your practice, when you feel some agitation in the mind—and that's going to come, it comes for everybody at different times—when you're feeling the agitation, this sense of unease, notice and explore the expectation and the craving behind it.

I've found something so helpful in my practice, which I mentioned in one of the groups this morning: beginning to appreciate the feeling of struggle as helpful feedback rather than as a problem. Mostly when we're struggling with something, whether in meditation or in life, it's a very uncomfortable feeling, especially when we're caught in it. But actually, that feeling is telling us something really important. What it's telling us is that something is going on in our experience that we're not accepting.

Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

A million examples come up in meditation. You're sitting and you're struggling with some discomfort in the body. What is the struggle telling you? That you're not relaxed back and open to the unpleasantness. You're expecting it or wanting it to go away. So we're in a struggle.

Maybe you're sitting and for the whole sitting the mind's just wandering, just a run of thoughts, and you're getting frustrated with that. What is that frustration, what is that struggle telling you? That you're not accepting of the fact that the mind is racing. So instead of seeing it as a problem—oh, okay, racing mind, racing mind—we just settle back and open to whatever it is.

The desire of expectation, wanting something to be different than it is, also feeds the comparing mind. And that's one that's really a great torment—when our mind is just caught in comparing ourselves with others. Sometimes yogis get into competitive sitting. That person behind me, they were in the hall when I came in, they're still sitting there when I'm leaving, or whatever. The mind can spin out in a million different ways.

There's a big difference between being inspired by someone else's practice or life and getting caught up in comparing and self-judgment. I experienced this in a big way during the first retreat I did with Sayadaw U Pandita. This was in 1984. We hadn't met him before. He came here, taught a three-month course, and he's a very demanding teacher. It was a high-pressured retreat. We were seeing him every day. We had to report on our experience. We had to report how many hours we sat and walked. And the aim was fourteen hours of sitting. So it was intense.

I was going through a lot—stuff was coming up for me. And then I would look around. There were some yogis who clearly were doing so well. It was so easeful for them. Meanwhile, I'm in all kinds of struggle. I just saw my mind going crazy, comparing myself, and there was a lot of self-judgment and a lot of suffering in that.

It was springtime. After weeks of this—and this was not just a passing phenomenon, weeks of really suffering from all this comparing—I was walking right outside the hall here. And right next to the wall, the flowers were coming up in the springtime. I saw that some flowers had come up and were already blooming. Some had emerged, but the flowers hadn't opened. Some were just poking out of the earth.

That was a great teaching for me. I realized, yes, we're all unfolding in our own way, in our own time. One flower doesn't compare itself to another. Oh, that one has bloomed already—why haven't I? Sometimes nature can be a great teacher for us if we just tune into the harmony of nature and try to translate that into our own lives.

One of the easiest places to notice this craving for becoming, this leaning into the next moment, is to become aware of the very common feeling of rushing. We're often rushing, even here on retreat where there's no place to go or get to. Rushing is when we're ahead of ourselves. Our mind is ahead of ourselves. Energetically, we're toppling forward into whatever we think we have to be doing. And it doesn't have to do with speed. We can be rushing while moving very slowly, and we can be rushing while moving very quickly.

There's a great line in one of James Joyce's short stories in the collection *The Dubliners*. It's a famous line you'll probably recognize: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body."

How often are we living a short distance from our body? A lot.

So just in your time here, if you remember, really pay attention to that. You'll pick up that this is really a craving for becoming. We're not back in the moment, simply open to this moment's experience. It's that craving for something in the future, and our whole energy body is responding to that.

In this process of leaning into the next moment—it can happen in sitting, it can happen in moving, when we're rushing—we're forgetting an essential understanding of the whole practice, and that is that liberation is not about getting anything. It's not about getting. It's not about craving. It's not about holding on or clinging. It's all about letting go. And we can let go in any moment. You don't have to wait till the ninth day of the retreat to let go. Why not let go now? In every moment. So that's settled back.

The Buddha gave some very specific and challenging instructions for this. Really take this in, because he's saying very directly how to live the awakened life. But it's challenging. He said, "Not reviving the past, not hoping to be in the future. Instead, with insight, see each arising state. Not craving after past experience, not setting one's heart on future ones, not bound up in desire and craving."

It's pretty profound. And you've probably noticed, in the days you've been here already, how much of our mental activity—a great preponderance of our mental activity—has to do with past and future. I don't know the percentage, but it's a big percentage of what our minds are doing. Reviving the past, hoping for the future.

Not reviving the past, not hoping to be in the future. Instead, with insight, see each arising state. It's so simple, but it's not easy. Not craving after past experience, not setting one's heart on future ones. That's a big one. Not bound up in desire and craving.

So what would it be like in your time here to actually practice that? Take those words. These are powerful instructions from the Buddha, powerful teachings. You can use your time here to really experiment, to challenge yourself, and to notice when the mind is reviving the past or longing for something in the future—and then to just come back to the present with each arising state. Even if it's just for short periods of time. But for each one of us to get a taste of the freedom of this can then inspire further practice.

The great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi had a very succinct expression of this. He said, "Try to be less, not more." Our whole life energy often is about becoming more, and the whole practice is about becoming less. It's like this rather than that. So we can watch for that. As you go through the day, there will be many and countless times when you can play with that understanding.

In the early morning of the Buddha's enlightenment, he was sitting under the Bodhi tree, and it is said that when the morning star first appeared and he had attained to full understanding, to full enlightenment, these are some of the words that came to his mind: "Realized is the unconditioned"—you could say the highest peace. "Realized is the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of cravings." He's saying so clearly the nature of the liberated mind: the end of craving.

So we can practice that. We can practice it in any moment, and we can also aspire for its complete fulfillment. I think it's helpful just to have this very large framework of understanding of what the practice is about, because it's so easy to get caught up in the momentary struggles and techniques and the minutiae of the practice, often losing sight of the big picture and what it's really all about.

Realized is the unconditioned.

Achieved is the end of craving.

I'd like to close with just a few lines from the Sufi poet Hafez:

*Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets trying to find you. Let it catch up.*

And this is the way.

CHAPTER 45

# Reflections on Non-Self (Anattā)

Joseph Goldstein · 1h04

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein presents a collage of reflections and practices designed to help practitioners directly taste the liberating realization of anattā (non-self). Rather than treating selflessness as a distant goal, he offers immediate, experiential doorways into understanding that the self is not something to eliminate, but a view to see through.*
>
> *Goldstein introduces several practical exercises: the shift from 'I am' to 'there is' (noticing how 'I am walking' creates contraction while 'there is walking' opens spaciousness); recognizing how we 'dream ourselves into existence' through countless unnoticed thoughts; and contemplating the Buddha's teaching to Rāhula—'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.' He explores how the teaching 'whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away' reveals there is nothing to want, offering a direct taste of the third noble truth. The Buddha's similes from the Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta—body as foam, feelings as bubbles, consciousness as a magic show—become instructions rather than mere descriptions.*
>
> *The talk addresses subtle identification with consciousness itself, drawing from both Theravāda Abhidhamma (the conditioned arising of knowing) and Zen teachings (Bodhidharma's 'show me your mind'). Goldstein shares a powerful reframe: experiencing phenomena in passive voice—'sensations being known'—which dissolves the sense of a doer. He concludes with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teaching that realizing emptiness naturally gives rise to uncontrived compassion for all beings.*

So many aspects of the Buddha's teachings about the nature of suffering and the possibilities of freedom resonate easily with our common sense understanding of ourselves and the world. For example, the importance of non-harming as the basic moral principle of living together in community, whether it's local communities or the global community. The understanding that all things in our lives are changing, inside and outside, and that if we're attached or grasp at that which in its very nature changes, then we suffer.

In some sense, this is very obvious. If we're attached to youth, we suffer. If we're attached to summer, we suffer in the winter. If we're attached to what's pleasant, then we suffer when things get unpleasant. This is obvious: if we're attached to that which in its

nature changes, there's going to be difficulties. All of this really seems quite obvious, I think, to most of us, even if we're not always living that understanding—but it's not difficult to understand.

There's one aspect of the Buddha's teaching, though, that offers a profoundly different perspective on things, a profoundly different view of ourselves and the world. It's one that really challenges our entire worldview. And that is the deep understanding and realization of what in Pali is called anattā—translated sometimes as non-self, or selflessness, or emptiness, emptiness of self. Realizing anattā is in some ways the great liberating jewel of the Buddha's teaching.

Over the years I've given a lot of talks and written a lot about how this view of self is created in the mind, how the mind constructs this idea of self and how it sustains it. But tonight what I'd like to do is offer something of a collage of reflections and practices that might help us—even briefly—to actually touch into the realization of it, so that we can experience a real taste of what selflessness means.

The first important understanding is that the self is not some existing thing that we need to get rid of. Our practice is not about getting rid of the self because it's not there in the first place. The whole notion of self is an idea, it's a view, it's a perspective that we bring to our experience. It's not some thing that's residing within us. And of course, the Buddha talked of this view of self as being wrong view.

One of the great Tibetan meditation masters of the last century, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, was a teacher to His Holiness the Dalai Lama—just an amazing teacher, and his writings are crystal clear. This is what he said about this: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others."

In some sense our whole practice is really geared towards the understanding, or the means, for letting go of this view of I, this view of self. The Buddha offered a very brief, succinct, and clear practice for doing this. This was advice that he gave to his son, Rahula, after Rahula had become a novice monk. He said: See everything with perfect wisdom. This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.

Maybe this one simple instruction would be enough if we could remind ourselves of it as we ride the roller coaster of our life experience. Thoughts arise—not mine, not I, not myself. Difficult sensations arise—not mine, not I, not myself. Different mind dramas, different emotions—not mine, not I, not myself.

But as we know, although these instructions are so simple and clear, not difficult to understand, they're not easy to apply when we're caught up in the forward momentum of our lives. In the midst of our daily lives, how often do we remember to apply that instruction? Not mine, not I, not myself. Probably not that often.

One exercise that I found very helpful in beginning this experiential exploration of selflessness is what I call "from am to is." I first played with this when I came across a teaching of Ledi Sayadaw, who was one of the great Burmese meditation masters. He lived at the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s, and was very renowned. In this teaching, he listed some of the variations of wrong view—a whole list of wrong view—and the list startled me.

This was what was on the list of wrong view: I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm angry, I'm excited, I'm afraid, I'm bored. What was startling to me when I read this was that all these phrases were simply the common expressions of how we live. It's just so common—we're speaking with someone, saying, "Oh, I'm angry today" or "I'm happy today" or "I'm this or that." And it's not the emotions or mind states themselves that are the wrong view. It's the "I am." The mind has co-opted these arising experiences and claims them as being I or mine.

So it was very striking to me to see that just our ordinary way of understanding ourselves and communicating what we're experiencing—wrong view is embedded right in that.

The first step I found helpful in this journey from "am" to "is" was to really look at and watch out for the felt experience of "I am." Just throughout the day, whether in formal meditation or simply moving about, there might be the felt sense of "I am" in walking. We're just walking, even just going for a walk, and mostly there's that internalized feeling of "I'm walking." Or as we're having different emotions, we can focus attention on what it feels like when we're experiencing it as "I'm angry," "I'm happy," "I'm sad," "I'm excited." Or other mental activities: "I'm thinking," "I'm planning," "I'm judging." You can make your own list of where the "I am" feeling is most predominant.

What's interesting about this is that since "I am" is really the default setting of our minds, almost any time we look, we can feel it. It's not like you have to be on the watch for some rare, esoteric arising. It's how we're mostly just living and feeling. But very rarely are we paying attention to what it feels like—that's just what we take ourselves to be. So the first step is simply tuning in from time to time to what it feels like.

Then make the move. Once you're feeling "I'm thinking," "I'm judging," "I'm walking," "I'm moving," "I'm doing this," "I'm doing that"—in whatever moment you tune into the "I am"—just make a little mental shift to "there is." There is walking. There is thinking. There is planning. There is judging. There is all of those same physical or mental activities.

What I noticed was very striking, and in a way very obvious. In the "I am" mode, when I tuned into how it felt, there was a contraction. It was kind of like being imprisoned in the "I am." And as soon as my mind made this simple shift to "there is"—from "I'm walking" to "there is walking"—right in that moment I could feel a greater spaciousness, a letting go of the contraction of "I am."

This is very immediate feedback. And it's not hard to feel. We just have to look and pay attention to it.

One way you might experiment with this—something we've been talking about all week—is using the instruction "there is a body" in sitting practice. I found that phrase very useful in walking as well, especially at a more normal speed. So just walking, instead of "I'm walking," using the phrase "there is a body" makes the mind a little broader just from doing that. Then walking and seeing what is being experienced. Within the framework of "there is a body," what's actually being felt are simply sensations in space. The notion of body actually disappears, even though we're using the phrase to ground us. As soon as we do that and start walking and feeling what's arising, it's just sensation in space without any form, without any sense of a solid body. And that, again, becomes a very easy doorway into feeling the selflessness of it all. It's just sensations being known.

Although these are very simple exercises, a way of just stepping out of the contraction of "I am," they have profound implications. The Buddha said, "By rightly understanding 'I am,' one makes an end of suffering. The eradication of 'I am' is the attainment of Nibbāna here and now."

This is not an insignificant move. But what's surprising is that we're just not really paying attention to it. So this exercise, from "am" to "is"—if you're interested, just play with it in the course of a day. Notice the contraction of our usual way of being in the world, the "I am." I'm doing this, I'm doing that, I'm feeling this, I'm feeling that. And in those moments when you feel that, shift to "there is" and notice the difference.

That's one little exercise you could do in terms of exploring the experience of anattā. The second exercise is what I call "dreaming oneself into existence." This has to do with setting the intention to be aware of the quickly passing thoughts in the mind—not the

loud, demanding ones, not the problematic ones, not the big stories, just the almost endless stream of quick thoughts that mostly we're not aware are happening. We don't pay much attention to them because they don't seem very problematic. It's just like a sound arising and passing.

One time on a self-retreat, I started noticing some of these quickly passing thoughts. It reminded me of an experience I think is common to many of us. Do you know that moment sometimes when you first wake up in the morning, and if you don't just jump out of bed, you might go back into a dream state for a minute or two, then wake up again? When I was watching these quickly passing thoughts, I realized it was the same experience. When these thoughts come and we're unaware of them, it's like we're going along—mindful, mindful, mindful—and then one of these thoughts passes through, not aware of it. In the moments of that thought, it's like dropping into a dream state for those few moments. Then it's like we wake up and we're mindful again.

So when I noticed this, I began to look a little more carefully at the content of those very seemingly innocuous thoughts. Again, these are not the big dramatic ones. These are just the quick ones, the light ones. But what I saw was that the content of these thoughts very often revolved around some sense of "I am." Maybe it's just a quick thought of a plan, or a judgment, or a like, or a dislike.

I realized that by not paying attention to these many quick thoughts, these many light thoughts, I was dreaming myself into existence. Because each of those moments of unawareness was like settling back into a dream. And even though they were quick and light, for each of those moments that the mind was lost in them, the mind was being reconditioned in one way or another. It was having an effect, but because it wasn't obvious, it was ignored.

Then it became, for me, a lot of fun. Going through the whole day, I set the intention: okay, just keep an eye out for these. And it was so interesting. Many times, because I had set the intention, I actually could catch them and be aware that they were there. And then, of course, many times I missed it and was only aware as I came out, realizing I was just lost in a thirty-second dream, and then out. It was very engaging for the mind and very liberating, because it was freeing the mind from a lot of these small moments of "I am." And so again, there was that taste of the selflessness of it all, of freedom from that. From "am" to "is"—dreaming oneself into existence.

The next two reflections around selflessness really have to do with the relationship of craving and desire to the sense of self. In one sense it's quite obvious: when we're caught up in craving or desire, there usually is a very strong sense of "I'm wanting

something." That sense of self is usually very strong in moments of craving, which is why I gave the whole talk on craving and the end of craving and how to really touch that.

Two reflections that were in some way transformative in my practice arose in some of my self-retreats over these last couple of years.

In one retreat I was just sitting, and one of the teachings of the Buddha, which I had read countless times and you're probably very familiar with—just one line that appears a lot in the different suttas—arose. It says, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." That's a statement that sometimes becomes the song of enlightenment. When people get enlightened in the suttas, often they will say, "And I realized that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Sometimes that teaching prompts awakening.

So people hear that and think, "Okay, we'll try it once." Just listen, take it in: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

I was on retreat, in sitting meditation, and that thought came to me. But it came in a different way. Instead of my reading it and thinking, "Yeah, yeah, that seems clear," that thought—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—because it arose in my mind while sitting, it actually became part of the sitting. And the implication of that understanding, that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, is that there is nothing to want. Because whatever we want will also just pass away.

This was applied specifically in this context to the meditative process itself. The other night I was talking about the craving for becoming and how that creeps into our meditation, where we're kind of leaning into the next moment, thinking that somehow we're here but as it becomes this, somehow it'll be resolved—not realizing there's just another next moment that will also pass away.

To drop this right into the middle of your sitting: you're in the process, you're in the flow of things arising and passing, you might call this phrase to mind—whatever has the nature to arise, right in our meditative experience, whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.

In that moment when my mind really grokked the implication of that—because everything is going to arise and pass away, there's nothing to want—I could feel the mind drop back, just for a few moments, into not wanting. Not wanting anything. Not wanting the next moment, not wanting more concentration, not wanting to be more mindful. Just not wanting.

That was an amazing moment. That was really a taste, even briefly, of the third noble truth. The Buddha talked about suffering as the first noble truth, the dukkha; the cause of dukkha, which is craving; the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving.

Before, I was undertaking my practice with the idea that, yeah, maybe in thirty years or five lifetimes, I'll reach the end of craving. It was like the far-off goal. I could understand it, but it seemed quite distant. And then at a certain point I realized: yes, the final eradication of craving might take a couple of weeks. But we can actually experience the end of craving for a moment at any time at all. We can actually taste it. We can touch it.

We can feel it. We can experience it. And it's really profound—there's nothing to want. You can just feel the mind drop back. It drops back into peace. You can say it drops back into emptiness. It drops back into selflessness, into openness, into not wanting.

For me, this was a moment that has stayed with me, and I use it in my practice now. From time to time, I remind myself of this and feel that connection to the experience of not wanting. And in that not wanting anything, there is no "I am" at all. There's no sense of self at all. It's really a moment of peace. It's a moment of completion. Even though it's just for a moment or two, it's real. I would really encourage you to play with that and to touch that. It's not hard to do. It's just remembering.

In the same vein of experiencing the selflessness of non-craving, of not leaning forward, I think it was mentioned earlier—the lump of foam. The Buddha gave five images for the different aggregates, which comprise the mental and physical phenomena. He called the body like a lump of foam—not foam rubber, but foam on water. And then feeling was bubbles in a stream. Perception is like a mirage. All mental formations are like a plantain tree or a banana tree—the trunk has no core to it. The trunk is just concentric leaves, so when you go to the center, there's nothing there. The center is empty. And then consciousness as a magic show.

I had read these images many, many times, but I always took them as just similes, as description rather than instruction. Then on one retreat, it came to mind because I had read it so often. So I took it as an instruction, because sometimes images are very powerful.

I'd be sitting, feeling the body, feeling the flow of sensations, and "oh, the body's like a lump of foam." And that was just what it felt like—the bubbling of different sensations arising and passing. But again, there was a further implication: the body will never be anything else but a lump of foam. So there's nothing to want.

I've seen in my own practice and with many yogis—so often we're feeling the sensations, feeling them so that they become something else. We're feeling some tension, so the tension releases. We're feeling some tightness or unpleasantness, so we can open it up or whatever. But whether there's tension or not tension, it's still a lump of foam. And it will always be just a lump of foam.

When I realized this through that image, the whole system relaxed. There's nothing to become, because it's not going to become anything different in that respect. Just as with "there's nothing to want" because whatever arises will pass away, the feeling of the body is just a lump of foam. This is the nature of the experience of the body. We don't need for it to become anything different than it is, because whatever we think it should become is still that same old lump of foam.

It had that same effect—the mind dropping back into not wanting. The reason I'm emphasizing all of this so much is that I've seen so clearly how craving for becoming, right in the meditation practice itself, is so strong. It's just some wanting of something. But that wanting keeps us bound on the wheel of changing phenomena.

And the freedom is in not wanting—the third noble truth, the end of craving, even if only for a few moments. We can touch that, we can taste it and feel the peace of it. From "I am" to "is," dreaming oneself into existence—there's nothing to want.

Another place where the "I am" becomes very strong is in our attachments to our views and opinions about things. We have views and opinions about almost everything. And to a large extent, we have views and opinions about things we know nothing about. But this does not stop the mind.

I'll tell you one story of this because it was so striking to me, and it was incredibly freeing when I realized this tendency towards attachment and clinging to views and opinions. This goes back to when I was teaching at that first summer institute of Naropa in 1974—it was like a Buddhist Woodstock. This was the first gathering of several thousand people who came from all over the country and different parts of the world. Ram Dass was teaching, Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching—it was this big spiritual happening. Quite amazing.

I was teaching meditation at that summer school, and in fact, this whole Vipassana momentum started right there. From teaching there, people began inviting us—would you come teach a retreat in South Carolina, or in Wisconsin—just all over the country. It was a very grassroots unfolding.

While I was teaching at Naropa, there was a visiting Tibetan lama, one of the great, great Tibetan teachers: Dudjom Rinpoche. He was the head of one of the great lineages and revered, really, as a great enlightened master. I saw a poster for a talk that he was giving, and somewhere on the poster it said something like "Dudjom Rinpoche, incarnation of Sariputra." I'm not sure I'm quoting it exactly, but that was the basic message. Sariputra was the chief disciple of the Buddha, second only to the Buddha in his awakening and enlightenment.

From the Theravada Burmese understanding, arahants, enlightened beings, are not reborn. So I saw this poster and my mind went on tilt. Because on the one hand, here was this great enlightened being, incarnation of Sariputra, and on the other hand, that's impossible—Sariputra wasn't reborn.

In that state of trying to hold this, I came to a startlingly clear understanding: I had no idea whether he was the incarnation of Sariputra or not. I really didn't have a clue. All I knew was the Burmese think this is impossible; the Tibetans say he is. And I realized two things: that I didn't know, and that I didn't have to have an opinion about it.

Before that, I could easily have gotten into some big Dharma argument. "Oh no, that's impossible, definitely." How often do we do that? We get caught up in our views and our opinions and get into all kinds of conflicts. Sometimes it's about things we may know a little bit about, but very often it's about things we really don't deeply know. We've just been conditioned to have a view, an opinion.

It's so freeing to be able to say "don't know," and that I don't have to have a view about what I don't know. Again, it's the loosening of this contraction of self—my views, my opinions.

A corollary of this, which is a little different but in the same vein: a strong sense of self can arise especially in situations of conflict, where we're attached to being right. That's what's fueling our energy—"Well, in this situation, I'm right." I would really pay attention to those moments, because even if one is right in some particular context, the attachment to that, to "I'm right," is a contraction. We really are narrowing ourselves, and it makes real communication impossible.

Pay attention to those situations and see if it's possible to let go of that sense, that attachment to being right. There's an expression somewhat in vogue in spiritual circles: Would you rather be right or be free? In those moments, if you pay attention to the difference, it's a no-brainer.

Perhaps the subtlest hideout of the sense of self, the one most difficult to see, is our identification with consciousness itself, with awareness itself. With practice—and many of you have been practicing for a while and probably have a pretty good sense, at least at times—different sensations come and go, thoughts come and go, and even big emotional dramas come and go.

We begin to get some sense that these are all impermanent in their flow, and maybe we get a sense of their impersonality—that they're arising out of conditions and passing away. But mostly, I think we have the sense, "Well, I'm the one who's knowing it all. I'm the one who's observing it." And in that identification with knowing, we have created the witness. We have created the observer.

So it's challenging and interesting to begin to play with ways of cutting through the identification with knowing, with awareness, with consciousness. There are a variety of ways of doing this—different techniques and methodologies for cutting through this subtle identification with the knowing. Different traditions have different techniques for it.

One approach is just a framework of understanding, and this really comes out of the Vipassana teachings. In every moment of experience, just two things are happening: knowing and an object. Knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, knowing of a smell, a taste, a thought. Our life, and really what we're calling self, is just this pairwise progression, moment after moment—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. Breathing in, there's the sensation of the in-breath and the knowing of it. Breathing out, there's the sensation of the breath and the knowing of it. The rise, the knowing of it. The fall, the knowing of it.

In every moment, that's all that's happening. There's the knowing and the object of the knowing. When we settle back in that understanding, then we can settle into just this flow of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, realizing that there's no one behind it to whom it's happening. Who we are is this pairwise progression. And in fact, this is what life is. Our whole life is this.

In the teachings of Vipassana, this understanding, this insight, is not some deep esoteric truth. This can be understood and experienced quite early on in one's practice. It's very accessible. It's just having the understanding, maybe, to begin to frame your experience in this way. Notice how in each moment, whatever the experience is—a thought, a sound, a sensation, a breath—whatever it is, there's the knowing and the object. Knowing and object. Knowing and object. This insight is called in this tradition

"purification of view," because in that experience we see that there is no self behind it. It's not happening to anyone. What we are is this process. So this is one very direct way of experiencing anattā.

There's another way also. And as you hear all of this, just to the extent that you can remember any of it, I really offer it as something to explore in your practice. Whichever one of these, or several of them, resonates or feels interesting, really apply it. Because the only value of this will be in your applying it. It's not just in hearing it.

So here's another experiment which I really have enjoyed doing. It's really a thought experiment. And I began to value the power of thought experiments when I read a recent biography of Einstein by Walter Isaacson—it was a great book. He describes a lot of Einstein's amazing discoveries. Einstein wasn't an experimental physicist. His insights all came as thought experiments, and then the mathematics around it. So I had my own little Einstein moment. That may be a little grandiose, but it was something.

In the teachings, in the Abhidharma, it describes what conditions are necessary for the arising of seeing consciousness or hearing consciousness. There's a very clear description: these particular causes are there, these conditions are there, then seeing consciousness will arise. For that to happen, it's said that we need four things. We need an eye that is in working order. We need light. We need attention. And something has to come into our field of vision. If those four conditions are present, seeing consciousness will arise. We'll know the sight. The eye, light, attention, and something crossing.

So I was just walking around the loop...

And I was just playing with my mind, as I like to do. So I made a little experiment, because I was seeing. As I was walking, I was just seeing. So I had this thought experiment: Well, would I be seeing if there was no light? I just took different conditions away in my mind. If there was no light, I couldn't see anything. Or if there was no eye, I couldn't see anything.

So right in that moment, and just for that moment, it was so clear—the conditioned nature of consciousness. Consciousness is not something that's always there. Moment after moment, very, very rapidly, consciousness arising and passing, arising and passing, dependent on conditions. You take a condition away, that particular consciousness is not going to arise.

And so again, it cut through the identification with consciousness as being I, as being self, as being a mind. It's just the result of these conditions. Take a condition away, it's gone. You can try it. It's the same thing with hearing consciousness. It's the same with all the senses.

Now we're shifting gears to how this could be approached from another tradition, but I want to back up a little bit. In meditative experience and in different traditions, consciousness or awareness is described in different ways. In some traditions, it's really described as this momentary arising and passing, arising and passing, as I described. In other traditions, awareness is described more as a field—and sometimes in instructions you might find that kind of language: things arising in awareness, as if awareness is the field in which things are happening.

These are just different—you could say metaphysical—descriptions of the experience of awareness. It reminds me somewhat of how light can be described as either a wave or a particle, depending on how it's observed. So rather than getting caught in thinking one is right and one is wrong, it's just that sometimes we have the experience of awareness as being a field, and sometimes we experience it by really seeing its momentariness.

In both cases—and this is why that distinction is not so important—in both cases the necessity is to find some way of not identifying with it. This becomes in some sense easier if we're seeing the momentariness, because then it's clear: it's just arising and passing moment after moment. It's a little more difficult to not identify with the field, but there are ways to do it.

There's one very famous Zen exchange where Bodhidharma, the great master who brought Buddhism from India to China, was living in his cave and facing the wall for nine years. Then this man—the spelling is H-U-I-K-E, and my Chinese is a little rusty—but he became the great disciple of Bodhidharma. So Huike comes to Bodhidharma and is tormented. He's in a lot of suffering. At first, Bodhidharma just dismisses him. But Huike pleads, "Please, please help me."

This is the dialogue. It's just a few lines, and the last line is a moment of realization—but often people hear it as a Zen witticism and see, in a way, the humor or whatever. Don't listen on that level, because it's saying something very profound. Try to listen to it on that deeper level.

Huike comes to Bodhidharma and says, "I'm in so much suffering. Please pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind and I'll pacify it."

Huike says, "I've looked for it everywhere. I've looked for my mind everywhere, and I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There—it's already pacified."

Right there. And this is also in some of the Tibetan teachings, in the Dzogchen teachings. One of the exercises they have people do is to look for your mind. Can you find your mind? You look for it, and there's nothing to find. As one of the great Tibetan teachers said, "The not finding is the finding." That's what's to be realized—that it can't be found.

I really use that little dialogue in my practice. Especially when I'm caught up in something, when the mind is just upset in some way or other, I'll remind myself of this. Can I find my mind? There's nothing to find. Already pacified.

At this point, I just need to use that short phrase—"already pacified"—because I'm so familiar with the dialogue. Already pacified. It's amazing: just by realizing the unfindable, selfless nature of the mind, immediately in that moment we can rest in peace.

There is a technique or exercise that I have found really helpful in highlighting this aspect. In the course of our practice—and I'll be talking about a kind of linguistic construction—usually in our life and our experience, we language it to ourselves in the active voice. "I'm doing this, I'm going there, I'm whatever." There's a subject, verb, object.

At one point I started reframing experience in the passive voice, and I did this particularly in walking meditation. I was just walking, and instead of the sense of "I'm walking," I reframed the way I was experiencing it through this passive voice: sensations being known. So it's not "I'm knowing the sensation"—it's sensations being known.

There's a lot embedded in that. First, that linguistic construction of the passive voice takes the subject out of the picture. Sensations being known—as soon as we drop into that perspective, already the sense of self is gone. All that's there is sensations being known.

When I was doing this, so much was revealed. In the course of a simple step—just play with this: if you move your arm for a moment, with that frame, just feel the sensations being known. It's effortless. It's completely effortless. There's no one doing anything. Sensations are just being known, and the different sensations of the movement are being known perfectly and exactly—not a moment before, not a moment after. They're just being known.

Going through the whole day within this framework became so easeful. Throughout the whole day, it was just different things being known, arising and being known. No one's there doing anything.

For me, this completely changed the walking meditation in particular, because the movement is so clear and obvious. You're just walking and the sensations of the movement are being known. It's very easy to get into that framework. If it interests you at all, I would just experiment with it and play with it. At whatever point, it just becomes natural and easeful. There's nothing special here. There's nothing you have to look for. It's just things being known. It's so simple and so easeful.

If you do decide to play with it a little and you drop into that place of ease, then you could ask a further question. Once you're just in that rhythm—okay, so there are just sensations being known—then you could drop in the question: Known by what? Just "known by what?" There's nothing to find.

This is the great mystery of consciousness. There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening. It's quite remarkable. What's so interesting is that it's so easy to go through our whole life and never even be investigating this very basic aspect of what it means to be alive, to have experience, what consciousness is. Our whole practice just opens these doors.

The Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein had a great line about this which is very relevant to our practice. He said, "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar. Our language so conditions our understanding. That's why this simple little play of going from active voice to passive voice—the grammar changes, the experience changes. It really is a doorway into understanding the empty, selfless nature of our lives, our experience.

I can't let a retreat go by without mentioning my favorite story of the Big Dipper, which I've been talking about for the last forty years. The Big Dipper is up in the sky.

I'll spare you the whole story. Clearly, there's no Big Dipper in the sky. It's a concept. We see a certain pattern and we put a concept on it: Big Dipper.

When we realize that there's no Big Dipper, that it's just our own mental construct, does anything change in the sky? Everything is exactly as it always was. You could think of the concept "Big Dipper" as being analogous to the concept of self. The concept of self is a construct. There is a certain pattern of mental and physical elements. We see the pattern, just like we see the pattern of stars. We put a concept on it: self, I, "this is me." But in realizing that it's just a concept, everything is exactly the same. It's just that we're seeing it differently, seeing it more clearly. And so then we operate in our lives from a much wiser place.

I'd like to close with two little teachings, both from Tibetan teachers. One highlights the importance of understanding that even though the depth of our practice, the liberating power of it, is to see and understand the selfless nature of it all—that experience is not happening to anyone, but rather what we call self is the process, this changing process—it's also important to understand that on a relative level we can use the concept of self. The conventional way we understand things, the way we language things, the way we talk to one another—on that conventional level, it's fine to use this notion.

So this little teaching points to that: "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerate it."

I like that because yes, we're real in the conventional way that we all know, and that's fine. But we have to get to that other place of realizing we're not *really* real in that way.

This last piece is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and it points to the connection between the realization of selflessness and love and compassion, because these two are intimately related. He said:

"When you realize the true emptiness of phenomena, you will spontaneously feel an all-embracing compassion for all beings who are immersed in samsara's ocean of suffering because they cling to the notion of an ego. This troublesome ego, this sense of self, which is so concerned about itself, has in reality never begun to exist, it does not exist now, and so it cannot cease to exist. It's not there in the first place, so it's not something we have to get rid of. Not the slightest trace of it can be found. When you recognize this empty nature, therefore, any notion of there being an ego to dissolve vanishes."

So it's not that we have to get rid of it. And at the same time—and this is the line that just resonates so deeply—in realizing the selfless nature, "the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

I find that such a powerful and resonant teaching. The more we let go of this self-centeredness on the most fundamental level, that sense of "I am," the more we let go of that or see through it, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless.

This is our practice. This is what we're doing here.

CHAPTER 46

# Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 58 min

> *In this interactive Q&A session from an insight meditation retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses a rich variety of questions from practitioners at different stages of their journey. He clarifies that body awareness practice need not be limited to body scanning—one can hold the frame 'there is a body' while maintaining open awareness of whatever arises within it.*
>
> *A significant portion explores the subtle distinction between sadness and unhappiness, illustrating how precise recognition of emotional states can release what feels stuck. Goldstein describes sadness as having a quality of sweetness or poignancy, while unhappiness feels bleaker. This leads to deeper discussion of awareness itself—explaining that the search for 'what knows' is resolved not by finding something, but by recognizing that the knowing is already happening. He offers the analogy of space: like space, awareness has nothing graspable to find, yet unlike space, it has knowing capacity.*
>
> *The session addresses practical concerns about integrating meditation with therapy, the relationship between Buddhist concepts of non-self and therapeutic frameworks of self, and how to maintain awareness as practice deepens. Goldstein emphasizes the importance of noting 'seeing' to cut mental proliferation, explores the eight precepts (particularly celibacy and renunciation as non-addiction rather than deprivation), and offers profound reflections on grief and loss—distinguishing between the feeling of loss, which even the Buddha experienced, and grief as a response to loss. The discussion closes with insights on the union of relative and ultimate levels of experience in mature spiritual practice.*

Only easy questions.

I have an easy question. We have now moved to "there is a body, there is a whole body." Do we stay with a body scan through the entire sit, or would you suggest moving elsewhere if we have done a body scan, or do we continue using a body scan?

So in using the suggestion "there is a body," that doesn't necessarily imply doing a body scan, although a body scan can be part of it. But it's also possible to use just the frame "there is a body," holding that frame with an open awareness within it, where one is simply aware of whatever is arising. And in either of those approaches, you can move back and forth between the two—really whatever serves you. But it's not limited to a body scan.

I have one easy question. The second one, meh. The easy one is, could you say more about, from your perspective, the difference between sadness and unhappiness? And then the one that I'm not sure is easy is, over the years I've heard many explanations about that which is seeing, that which is aware, but I still don't get what it is that's seeing and what's aware.

What was the first one? Oh, yes. See, when you don't hold on to things. That's the charitable interpretation.

I think this came up in one of the groups. I was talking about how at one point I was having this experience which I was calling sadness and naming it sadness, but it really felt lodged. Even as I was being mindful of it—sadness, sadness, sadness—it just felt stuck. It was not moving through.

So that aroused my interest, and I started to look more carefully at what the feeling state was. When I honed in more carefully, I realized that it was not the feeling of sadness—it was the feeling of unhappiness. They're close, but they're really two different feelings.

What was interesting is that once I aligned properly with what was actually there—oh, unhappiness—that's when it all moved through. So it's just the importance sometimes: if we're feeling stuck, it may be because we're misperceiving something. It could be worth taking another look, particularly with emotions, because there can be so many varieties and things that are close to one another.

For me—and we may all have different experiences of this—but in a strange kind of way, sadness has a certain quality of sweetness to it. It's like a poignancy. Whereas unhappiness is a little bleaker. The feeling was quite different. And as I say, it was only when I could get aligned with "oh, that's what this is" that it allowed for the release of it.

In terms of your second, difficult question—you actually answered it yourself. Because in trying to find what it is that knows, what it is that is aware, the very fact that you can't find it, as I said last night, is the finding. There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening.

It might be somewhat analogous—I don't want to push this analogy too far—to space. Can you find space? "Oh, there it is." It's not like that. There's nothing to find, and yet we can become aware of it. But it's not a thing.

The mind is somewhat analogous to space. It's different than space in that space does not have any knowing capacity. Whereas the mind is space-like in that there's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is going on. So the fact that you look for it and can't find it—you might just rest in whatever your experience is of not finding. And just play with it.

A couple of days ago you mentioned almost in passing that therapy might be useful in conjunction with practice. And then last night as I listened to you, I wondered about therapy. Most of the modes of therapy I'm aware of have a central concept of the self—self-discovery, self-actualization, self-realization, false self, true self, self, self, self. So I wondered if therapy is actually dangerous, perhaps more than for the usual reasons, because it's so contradictory to the core teachings of Buddhism.

First I would say, for those of you interested in pursuing that, find a good Buddhist therapist. An enlightened Buddhist therapist.

That aside, I think I've mentioned, and I alluded to it last night, that there are two different levels of our experience. In terms of terminology, we might call one the relative level and one the more ultimate level. On the relative level, we're dealing with the sense of self and other, being and personality, and personal story.

And we often get entangled and caught up in all kinds of unwholesome patterns. So there are times when entering into that level with the concepts of self and other, and just taking that all in, is fine—good work can be done. It becomes problematic if that becomes the final understanding of who we are, because then we're imprisoned in that notion of self.

But if you can understand that this is a relative level of experience, and that there is a more underlying one—which is what we've been discovering here, where even the solidity of the body disappears—we perhaps get tastes of what selflessness means, the impersonality of it all, and the momentariness of it all. To the degree that we explore that realm and have some real experience of it, then when we operate on the relative level, we do it with much greater freedom. We can play on it and get whatever value there is from it, but we're not getting caught by that concept. And so I think the two can be synergistic in a certain way.

*Question: Last night you spoke about having the saying come to you in meditation —"whatever has the nature to arise also has the nature to pass away"—and then that led you to this insight of "there's nothing to want." Similar to the relative level, where there is a relative self, I wonder if you could speak to an enlightened or skillful way of pursuing things, of having objectives and goals as we go about our lives, without getting caught.*

Obviously, as we go through life, we all have goals and aspirations and things we want to do and accomplish. That's just part of being alive. I think the key point to explore—and this takes a lot of clarity and sometimes courage—is to really get into the habit or the practice of investigating and exploring one's motivation for doing things. Because it's the motivation which really, to a very large extent, determines the ethical value of the undertaking.

Very often, the motivations may be mixed—unless you happen to be a saint. Any saints? We can have a really good motivation, but still mixed in with it, there can be some shadow side. So it's just to be honest with ourselves about it so we're not deluding ourselves about what's moving us forward.

I'll give a very trivial example of this. This was back in the India days when I was still somewhat new in the practice, though I'd been there a couple of years. In the summer months we would go up to the mountains because it got really hot down on the plains. There would be a small community of people living in the mountains, doing their practice. Once a week, people would gather on the little lawn in front of the cottage I was staying in, and I would give a dharma talk each week to this group of friends.

It was a beautiful thing to do, sharing the dharma. But I noticed that each week, before I started speaking, I would count how many people came. "Oh, this week there were six people. Last week there were ten people. What happened?" My mind just did this. I didn't invite it—it just did it. But I was mindful enough to see it. I could smile at it and let it go. And then as soon as I got into the dharma talk, that was all completely gone, and it felt like the motive was really pure.

So it's just being sensitive to the range of our motivations so that we can strengthen the positive aspects and see the more negative ones and let them go. Motivation, I think, is really the key challenge.

*Question: A couple of days ago you mentioned taking a moment of delight after realizing a thought. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on what you meant by taking delight.*

As you know very well by now, we get lost in thought a lot. Thoughts come and carry us away, and then at a certain point we wake up from being lost. A very common tendency is to then judge ourselves for having been lost again for the millionth time—"I can't do this," whatever self-judgmental commentary arises. But of course that's just getting lost again.

I found it much more fruitful when I'm lost, lost, lost—and then awake—to actually take delight in the experience of having awakened, to appreciate that. And even more than that, right in that moment of having gone from being lost in the thought, which is

delusion, to aware that we're thinking, which is wakefulness—right in that moment of transition, it's possible to really experience very directly the nature of the deluded mind and the nature of the aware mind. We get a very clear recognition: "Oh, that's what a deluded mind is like—just lost in the story, not knowing what's going on. Oh, this is what awareness is."

Going back to the first easy question—or the hard question of the easy one—what is awareness? We don't have to have even a language for it, because in every moment of awakening from being lost, in that very moment, instead of jumping to some other object, we can take that pause and recognize, "Oh, this is what awareness is." And it's very clear in contrast to having just been deluded. So just that transition moment is very fruitful to explore. Mostly I think people tend to rush back to the breath or a sensation instead of extracting the juice of that transition.

*Question: You've used the language a few times—you had some experience and then you honed in on it and learned something else. Can you give some examples of what "honing in" looks like? And similarly, what does celebration look like? Is it "yay"? Or is it "wow"? Or is it "how cool"? Is it a smile?*

Well, the second question really depends on your personality. And in the context of a retreat, for the more exuberant types, you can probably tamp it down a little bit. I don't remember particularly whether I used the word celebration—I often use the word delight. It's just delight in seeing something that hasn't been seen before. I think I mentioned this in terms of working with māna, or conceit. When I see it in the mind, I'm delighted to see it, because I would rather see it than not see it. So every time it arises: "Oh yeah, there it is. That's māna, that's conceit." It's that kind of appreciation of the wisdom or the insight of seeing something that we might not have seen before.

In terms of honing in, it can happen in many different ways. The example was sadness and unhappiness. We're seeing something is stuck, and it's almost like holding the question: "Well, what's going on? What's here?" Just simple questions like that. Or, as we've mentioned throughout the week, often asking the question with respect to different experiences we're having: "What's the attitude in the mind about this?"

What's interesting to me about the use of these questions is that the power of the question is not so much in getting a printout of an answer. That's not the point of the question. We're using the question as the vehicle for honing in. It's directing our attention to part of our experience. We don't even have to have a verbal answer.

I can't remember whether I mentioned this to the group, but one time I was sitting and just watching the breath. I was just feeling the breath, completely ordinary sitting, nothing special going on. It felt easeful, just feeling the breath go in and out. But then the thought came to me, just to ask that question: "What's the attitude in the mind?" I didn't have any premonition that there was some big attitude. It was just a tool that arose. So I'm just feeling the breath, in and out, in and out. "What's the attitude?" Just by asking the question, I could feel my mind relax back from a wanting that I didn't even know was there—that leaning with the breath, wanting to get more calm or more peace or more concentrated. Some subtle energetic movement. So just by asking the question, the asking of the question had the effect, not the answer to it. Sometimes questions are simply a way of honing in.

*Question: Can you say something about awareness and levels of awareness? I'm here and I'm super concentrated, and then I go to lunch and there's a lot going on and I'm still really aware but not at that super deep level. And then when I go home, it's just like fifty percent awareness or something. How do we deal with that? How do we accept that? What's enough?*

Don't take this as a metaphysical truth. It's just my impression of...

the experience you're talking about. I don't think, off the top of my head, I wouldn't talk about levels of awareness. It's like, at least to a large extent, we're either aware in the moment or we're unaware. What you're calling being less aware sounds to me like there are just more moments of being distracted from being aware.

So here maybe there's a kind of momentum built up where there's a flow of mindfulness, a flow of awareness which is relatively continuous. Then you go out and maybe in the dining room there's a lot happening. So there are still the same moments of awareness, but the mind may get distracted a lot more frequently. It's jumping in and out of awareness, and that's why it may feel less deep.

One thing which we have not talked a lot about, but which can be very helpful when you notice that the awareness seems to be losing some of its continuity: for most people, the visual field is the predominant sense door. For people who have good vision, any vision, we live in the world of what is being seen. But sight doesn't impact us the same way as a sound or a sensation, or even a thought. Even those thoughts slip in and they can be more impactful than sight. It's like there's not a very obvious impingement. And so we find that we're just living in this world of what's being seen, very rarely being mindful that we're seeing. We're just in it.

A good part of the reactivity in our lives comes from being reactive to something that is being seen. I had a very striking example of this on retreat. I noticed that when I would go into the dining room, trying to go in very mindfully, my mind would have a comment about almost everybody. Walking too fast, walking too slow, taking too much food. I don't like what they're wearing. It was totally ridiculous. I mean, it was just ridiculous. I was watching my mind do this. And then I realized that all of that mental activity and proliferation was happening in reaction to what was being seen.

So what I started doing was entering the dining room and all I would note was "seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing." On the line for food, seeing. Going to the table, seeing, seeing. It was amazing. Ninety-eight percent of the judgments and comments were gone because I was picking up, at that point, the point of contact of the sense object with the sense door. I was acknowledging, "Oh yeah, seeing, seeing, seeing." And it just cut all that proliferation which had been coming because of the unmindful seeing.

So that's an example of how you can begin to carry the awareness through more everyday, even faster-paced activities. Even in these last days of the retreat, I think it would be interesting for you to incorporate the noting of seeing more often. Because if you connect with it, it could be a really powerful force for mindfulness in your life.

Let me just read this one question since it came a few days ago: "Can you give an overview of the precepts? Why undertake them? I don't recall anyone really explaining the why versus just talking through the what. I'd specifically like explanation on two: Why no sexual activity at all versus the less strict no sexual misconduct? And two, why no dance, music, etcetera? As someone who dances, I think there's a difference between art and entertainment. I'm doing all eight precepts, but I feel like I'm just going through the motions versus knowing why."

That's a good question. So the essence of the precepts—there are a couple of very juicy components to the practice of them. One which I mentioned just at the beginning of the talk last night: the precepts are all about commitments to non-harming. When we undertake the precepts, we're being very explicit about the fact that, okay, I'm not going to harm any being in these ways. And that's really the foundation of all ethical conduct.

Just think for a moment what the world would be like if people followed just one precept: not to kill. It would be a different world. And we could go through all of the precepts in that way. So they're very powerful expressions of non-harming. And one of the gifts that we give to others when we follow the precepts is the gift of fearlessness.

Because we're saying with our actions and our being, you need not fear me. I'm not going to do anything harmful to you. So what a gift. We're giving the gift of trust. We're giving the gift of fearlessness to everybody we're in contact with when we're committed to the precepts. There's really a tremendous value in this.

Another aspect of the precepts has to do with the cultivation of renunciation. Renunciation is one of the paramis, one of the perfections of the Buddha. Renunciation has always been challenging—that's my strongest parami.

I think in our culture, with that particular term, it's very easy for renunciation to carry a connotation of deprivation. "Oh yeah, I'll give it up. I know it's good for me, but okay." But at a certain point, when I really looked into the power of renunciation and what it was about, I reframed it in terms of non-addiction. When we're renouncing something, it's like settling back into a non-addictive frame of mind. And when I used that terminology, when I thought of non-addiction, the sense and feeling of freedom was contained right in that phrase. I think we can all relate to the suffering of different addictions and the freedom that comes from non-addiction.

With regard to the third precept and why we take the precept while on retreat of refraining from all sexual activity—you need not worry, because on Sunday we're going to take the lay precept of just refraining from sexual misconduct. You need not continue your monastic lifestyle when you go home. But it's really interesting to take that precept here of refraining from all sexual activity on a couple of levels.

One, as we all know, sexual energy is very powerful. It's a powerful energy within us. And just by refraining, we're conserving that energy or gathering that energy, all in the service of the practice and awareness and mindfulness. So just on an energetic level, it's very empowering.

In addition, it really gives an opportunity to hone in on the nature and the experience of desire. Just because we take the precept to refrain from sexual activity, the mind might not have gotten that message. So it's not uncommon at all at different times—and also at certain ages—for there to be powerful fantasies, sexual fantasies, and for the desire to get very strong.

One of the great things I've learned in all these years of practice is in watching sexual desire arise in the mind and feeling it in the body, sometimes very powerfully, but having taken the precept, I'm just being with it and watching it. What we learn is—and this is not something we necessarily carry fully into our lives outside—but on retreat it becomes very obvious. This desire, this sexual desire arises very strongly, and just

watching, watching, watching, at a certain point it goes away. It's not that we're pushing it away, and it's not that we're suppressing it. It's just in its nature: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

That's a very powerful lesson, because I think more commonly we live with the idea that with desire of any kind—though it's very obvious with sexual desire, it could be any other—we're often living with the idea that I either need to express it or I'm suppressing it. That becomes kind of the duality of how we're holding it. But meditation shows us a completely different way of holding that's much freer, where we're not suppressing it. We're being with it, we're feeling it, but realizing it does not have to be acted on. It will arise and pass by itself.

This gives us a lot more freedom in our lives to be discerning about when to act on it, when not to act on it, when is it skillful, when is it unskillful. If we're caught in that duality of "if I'm not expressing it, I'm suppressing it," that can lead us into a lot of unskillful actions. So there's a lot to learn from these temporary periods of renunciation, because then we get to see the impermanent, impersonal nature of desire.

Of course, desire is a very powerful force in our lives.

*Question: I've been struck by the use of words, the noting, the asking of questions even today, the importance of choosing the word "unhappiness" versus "sadness." But I felt there are other times where we've said those are tools and they may fade away for an open awareness. Can you say a little bit about when they're useful? Are they a step along the way?*

The most obvious use of language in the meditation practice itself is just the tool of mental noting—when we're putting a word: in, out, thinking, hearing, seeing. For some people, this is just a very skillful way of helping us stay connected moment to moment with what's happening.

So it's a support for that connectedness. If there's an easeful flow of experience, the accuracy of the word is not that important. Sometimes people will say, "I'm feeling some sensation, I'm not quite sure what it is. Is it pressure? Is it tension?" If we can just be with it in an easy way and it doesn't feel bound up in some way, it doesn't matter. Any word is enough to connect us.

But when something feels caught—like with the sadness and unhappiness—that's when looking to see more accurate perception might help us to actually become mindful of it. But even when we're using the word skillfully, using the noting, did I mention

to the group NPMs? So in the course of practice, the NPMs—noticings per minute—go way up. At a certain point in practice, our perception is so quick, things are happening much too quickly to note. The words are too slow.

So then, if you have found that the noting overall is helpful, you could maybe note every fifth thing, just dropping in one, just as a way of staying connected, or drop the noting altogether and just be with the flow of that rapidly changing experience. They can be used at times skillfully, but they're not the essence of the practice. The essence, you could say, is the noticing or the feeling into the experience. The words are really used just as a support.

*A participant asks about the grief they feel at losing a close friend during the retreat, wondering whether that grief indicates attachment, and if so, whether that's a bad thing.*

First, I'm sorry to hear about the loss.

When the Buddha died—and obviously he was this incredibly important person for countless beings—it's said that there was a lot of grieving among his disciples, except for the fully enlightened ones, the ones who had completely uprooted all attachments, all desire, all conceit, all sense of "I am," who had finished the work. I'm not talking from personal experience here, but the Arahants, the fully enlightened ones, abided in equanimity, knowing that this is the nature of things. It's not unlawful that what is born will die. That's true for everyone. So when our realization of that is complete, I think the mind can stay in a kind of equilibrium. For everybody under that very high threshold, there was a lot of grieving. And it probably did come from some sense of attachment and loss of a loved being, but it's kind of the natural expression of human life at these levels.

But even the Buddha—his two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, died before him. And given the Buddhist cosmology and the stories, these were beings who had been with the Buddha through countless past lifetimes, and they were all fully enlightened beings. You can imagine the communion that existed among them.

It's very interesting—after they died, the Buddha commented, and this will be a bit of a paraphrase: "This order of disciples, of nuns and monks and laypeople, now seems empty to me. It feels like the limbs of a great tree have been cut off." So he's clearly expressing a kind of poignancy, an acknowledgment of the loss. But then he goes on to say in that same teaching—and this phrase, I'm not sure whether I'm putting this in or I remember reading it—but I seem to recall it said, "Isn't it remarkable that even in experiencing the loss, the mind of the Buddha, the Tathagata, is not grieving."

That was a very interesting juxtaposition for me, to see the difference between loss and grief, and how, at least perhaps at a certain level or in certain situations, we could be open to the feeling of loss and feel it deeply, as the Buddha did. I find that very poignant, in the loss of his great disciples—to see the possibility of opening to the feeling of loss, which carries its own kind of pain. It's not necessarily a pleasant feeling, the feeling of loss. But grief is something else. Grief is a different feeling. It's a response to the loss.

It could be interesting to explore. Often in these situations, people have come to me at different times describing just what you said. It's a very tender situation. The heart is very vulnerable and open at that time, and sensitive. So it's also a question of timing and interest.

Whether people just want to be with the feeling as they're feeling it, letting that work through, or whether there's interest in some people of investigating something like, "What is the feeling of loss? What is the feeling of grief?" There are ways of diving into it, but it's very individual—when one is ready to or interested in doing so.

But it's a very poignant and rich arena because it's universal. It's not only the loss of others but our own death. How do we relate to that? These are big issues, and at one point or another, worth exploring, so we come to as deep an understanding as possible.

---

A questioner said, "I think I'm a little confused about what insight is. You shared those moments of insight last night very graciously from your own personal journey. Would you consider those moments of awakening? And how do you discern between an insight and a thought that's empty? I'm asking because I have had thoughts that have arisen that I found useful in clarifying and going deeper. Would I even know an insight? I'm just a little confused on that front."

I was teaching at a retreat that Ram Dass was leading in Maui in December, and I was giving a talk, and there was something in my mind in the midst of the talk. The thought came of something that I really wanted to say, and by the time I finished the sentence I was saying, it was gone. I still remember that.

I think it's interesting to notice—at least for the most part, maybe not all the time—that the thought itself is not the insight. The thought is an expression of something you've understood. Just as a simple example: suppose you're sitting and you're tuning in experientially to the truth of things arising and passing, that things are coming and

going and coming and going. You're experiencing that. And then the thought may come, "Everything really is impermanent." The thought is just an expression of the insight you already had. It's not the insight itself; it's just giving expression to the insight.

So when you have those thoughts that seem insightful, you might just check to see what was your experience just then that gave rise to the thought. Just begin to play with that. Now, it is possible that maybe an insightful thought will come independent of what your present moment experience is. You could just acknowledge that and see if it's valuable for you. But mostly, insight in the context of meditation is really about different ways of viewing experience.

I think we mentioned in the hall, and Bonnie had talked about, the different distortions or hallucinations of mind. They're basically a few basic distortions: where we take what is impermanent to be permanent, we take what's unsatisfying to be satisfying, and we take what's non-self to be self. In the course of our practice, when we're seeing, "Oh, things really are impermanent, are unreliable"—that becomes a lived experience, not simply an intellectual understanding.

The questioner reflected, "But sometimes those lived experiences hit harder than others, right?"

That's true. Sometimes they're really impactful and sometimes they're mild.

"Is there a problem with that? If it hits more, presumably I will shift the way I think about the world more."

I think that's true, but don't also undervalue the small ones.

"Maybe I'm thinking about a hierarchy of importance of these things."

Don't. In one way, we could think of the practice as having a scientific element to it in terms of the methodology and the lawfulness of how it all unfolds. There are very detailed descriptions of the whole unfolding path. That is one aspect. But another aspect is that meditation is more like an art. As much as it's kind of a scientific methodology, we can view our life as art.

It's like we're artists creating our lives, and the world is the palette. One little dab of paint in a corner may have a big impact on the whole picture. But if you think it always has to be big dabs and big splashes of color, then we miss some of the subtleties of what's going on. That's why I say don't make a hierarchy.

Years ago, when I was a freshman or sophomore in college, I was in New York, going to some of the museums and just learning. I didn't know very much about art or even how to look at paintings, but I would just go and really look. One of the first things that struck me—and it's vivid in my mind even now, fifty or sixty years later—was that when I was looking at a painting, the curtains in the background were as important as the figure in the foreground. They were equally part of the painting. The tendency is to focus on what's most obvious, what's most in the foreground, and in some way diminish the importance of what's in the background. That was a great lesson for me: to see things whole rather than create a hierarchy. I don't know if that insight will stand up among the artists among you, but that was my experience.

One student shared a reflection: "After your talk on anatta last night, over the course of today I found myself noticing how often I said 'I' in my thoughts. And I felt a fatalism and hopelessness. Because short of living in a cave where I never have to deal with people and talk about myself or be in the world, it just seems like—as you said—language is very conditioning, and it seems very difficult."

It's not a problem at all. It is totally fine—and I think I mentioned this—to use conventional language and conventional concepts. It would be very awkward to go through life saying, "These five aggregates are doing this and that." No, say "I'm going for a walk." There is absolutely no problem with that, and in fact there would be a problem if you didn't.

Even as we use conventional language and conventional concepts and relate in conventional ways, the whole metta practice operates on this conventional level. It's sending loving thoughts to oneself, to other beings. It's all on this relative level of experience, and that's the level we live in a lot, and it's totally fine. It's just that we also want to have a deepening understanding of what's underneath that conventional level. To the degree that we have some experience of the selfless nature, the impersonal nature, then as we're operating on the relative level, we get caught much less because we're infusing that level with a deeper wisdom.

In fact, I think the maturity of spiritual practice is learning the union of the relative and the more ultimate levels. They're not two different things. It's the same experience seen on different levels. Our practice is simply learning how to integrate all that.

Another question arose about the concept of time—looking at things as a whole. The student described doing walking meditation, feeling the sun, then coming to eat and feeling the temperature of the food, noticing the transition of how it was cooked. Being

mindful taking showers while it's raining, feeling that connection. Is this looking at the conceptual and the relative? How does one go about being with the whole, the elemental whole?

What you described was beautiful. That was a good expression of how the whole gets incorporated or understood in very simple activities. One way of fostering that intuitive connection with the whole—I think it happens more when we're practicing in the mode of open awareness rather than directed awareness. When the mind is directed, and I'm not putting a hierarchy on this, there are times when directed awareness is really necessary and important, and at other times it's more open and choiceless. But in that openness or choicelessness, we really are open. There is no choosing what we're being aware of. We're being aware of whatever presents itself in the whole, and I think that allows the mind to intuitively make many connections we might not have made when simply focused on a narrower object.

So from the meditative point of view, it seems to me that it's in that open awareness that what you're talking about becomes more possible. And it is beautiful to feel into different dimensions of things—which is very hard to do if we're caught up in our own desire and craving. There's that famous little quote: "When a pickpocket meets a saint, all he sees is the pocket." When we're narrow in our wanting, we miss everything.

So, okay, gang. We could do this for a long time. But let's just sit for a couple of minutes and let everything settle.

CHAPTER 47

# Nuances of Right Effort

Joseph Goldstein · 1h19

> *In this comprehensive talk, Joseph Goldstein examines vīriya (effort or energy) as one of the most crucial yet misunderstood aspects of meditation practice. He frames meditation as both a precise science following natural laws and a delicate art requiring subtle adjustments. The talk addresses common pitfalls: too much effort creates tension and striving, while too little leads to discouragement and the "meditative disease" of being more-or-less mindful—present enough to fool ourselves, yet not fully engaged.*
>
> *Goldstein offers practical techniques for refining attention: connecting with actual breath sensations rather than concepts, releasing control of the breath, and setting intentionality for short durations like a single in-breath. He emphasizes that building momentum through continuity of practice eventually leads to genuine effortlessness. Drawing on teachings from Sayadaw U Tejaniya and Sayadaw U Pandita, he explores how simply "being present" requires less effort than we assume, while monitoring our attitude toward experience remains essential.*
>
> *The talk presents two approaches to working with hindrances: the heroic effort exemplified by the Buddha's warrior-like determination before enlightenment, and the gentle warrior approach of Thích Nhất Hạnh, holding difficult emotions with tenderness. Goldstein concludes with the complementary frameworks of "building from below" (working directly with suffering and defilements) and "swooping from above" (recognizing the mind's innate luminosity), illustrated through the myths of Icarus and Sisyphus. Both perspectives are simultaneously true, and wisdom lies in knowing which to apply at any given moment.*

In many respects we can see meditation as an exploration, as a science of the mind. Because the mind and body are following natural laws, meditation is a way of exploring those laws. In that sense it's quite precise and scientific in its introspective method.

The Buddha taught with great precision about the liberating insights of the Four Noble Truths and the understanding that attachment is the basic cause of suffering. He taught with tremendous clarity about the possibilities of freedom, characterizing the whole path as coming to the end of suffering.

But meditation is also an art. It's not only in the scientific mode, it's also in the artistic mode. Tonight I want to speak about one particular quality of mind that needs to be practiced and understood in the context of meditation as an art, because it's a very powerful force that needs a very delicate touch. We need to understand the nuances of how to work with it in a very delicate and yet impactful way.

The Pali word for this mind state is *viriya*. Pali is the language of ancient India, and the texts have come down to us in this language, which is very closely akin to Sanskrit. *Viriya* is usually translated as energy or effort, although it has many other connotations. These two meanings are what I'm going to focus on this evening.

Without the development, strengthening, or application of *viriya*—of energy and effort in our lives—we simply stay caught in the habitual patterns of our conditioning. It takes effort to come out of those well-established patterns, or in a more negative way, we could say the long, well-established ruts. That's our habit. The neural pathways have been well-established in those ways. If we just let things go on as they are without the cultivation of some energy or effort, then that's our lives—just the unfolding of the habit patterns of our conditioning.

One of the problems in understanding *viriya* is that the word "effort" in English has many connotations, and it's very easy to misunderstand what effort means in the context of meditation practice. It's easy to conflate effort with an over-intense focus—we're making effort to be with the breath and we're intensely focusing. Or we might conflate it with some kind of dharma ambition and an over-striving, an over-efforting. It's very common for people in the practice, in trying to practice *viriya*, to get caught up in this shadow side of it, where we're really just making ourselves more and more tense.

Too little effort, on the other hand, leads to different problems. This is a common experience for meditators: when we're not making much effort, especially in the context of a retreat, it leads to discouragement, doubt, and disappointment. Not much is happening because we're not making enough effort, not applying enough energy.

So we begin to see the dial: too much and we get tense; too little and we lose it, nothing much is happening, and we feel a lot of doubt and discouragement.

When we appreciate the art of meditation and see clearly the necessary and subtle adjustments we need to be making all along the way, we understand that this is not something we get and find and then have for the rest of our meditative career. This is an ongoing tuning of the mind, just as with a musical instrument. It's not that you tune it once and for the rest of your life it stays that way. It needs to be tuned each time we play. We need to tune our minds in exactly the same way.

When we do this, it arouses the interest and the energy to play at the edge of our comfort zone. This is one way of coming out of our habituated patterns—we start exploring the unfamiliar. When things, both in our lives and in our meditation practice, begin to feel a little uncomfortable, we're outside the realm of what we're familiar with or comfortable with. Maybe it's some strong emotions or some strong bodily sensations or some situation. That forward edge is exactly where we want to be.

Only if we arouse the energy to play at the edge and have interest in discovering what can be learned there will we be taken out of the dream of our lives. We're just living in the dream of our thought, emotional, and physical patterns, going along with their momentum. To awaken from that and to see other possibilities takes some effort, takes some energy.

At the beginning of a retreat, or at the beginning of your practice, people very commonly experience the mind tumbling like a waterfall—just this endless tumble of thoughts and feelings and images and distractions and hindrances. Every once in a while we remember the breath, and then again the mind is just caught up.

This is normal. It's not unusual. This is what happens as we first get started and begin to build some momentum. I think it can be reassuring to know that this is common.

It's not that this is just me and I'm a terrible yogi. This is what the mind does as we're first getting started in this process. Whether we're starting as a new meditator or just beginning a retreat, this tumbling quality is completely natural.

One of the things that I love so much about the practice is that we are continually relearning and discovering new things about some of the basic principles we may have heard at the very beginning—principles like right effort. Much of what I'm going to share tonight comes from things I'm learning now, after so many years of practice, about making right effort. It's an ongoing process of opening, and that's what makes this whole path so extraordinary. The Dharma is vast, and as we enter into it and engage, it just keeps opening to newer and newer understandings.

Let me begin by talking about the very simple effort we make to be with our primary object of attention. Here I'll use the breath as an example, but this applies equally well to any other anchor you may be using to stabilize attention—whether that's the whole body, touch points, or sound. Different practitioners will find different primary objects to return to. For now, though, I'll use the breath.

As we pay attention to the breath, the first aspect of right effort is to refine our perception of the actual sensations we're feeling with each breath. At first, maybe we simply know we're breathing in and out without feeling any sensations. But we know we're breathing. That's enough. That's a beginning. We're there.

As we continue, we may notice the mind starts overlaying a subtle image on the breath. Perhaps we feel it like waves—a wave coming in, a wave going out. It might be some other image as well. That's okay; it's also helping us connect with the experience. But it's still an image, still a concept. So we drop down even further, come closer, and begin to feel the very specific sensations of each breath. It might be coolness or warmth, perhaps a tingling, a vibration, a slight pressure—very specific, ordinary sensations. That's the level we want to be on: close enough to feel the flow of sensations within each breath.

One of the first insights that emerges from doing this is realizing that the breath is not one thing. The in-breath isn't one thing and the out-breath another. Rather, there's a whole series, a flow of sensations constantly changing. We begin to break up the perception of solidity and see that what we call "the breath" is actually a flow of what we might call microscopic sensations—very subtle. By paying attention carefully, we begin to experience this directly.

As we engage with awareness of the breath in this way, of course the mind will wander and get lost in thought. Every time we become aware that we're lost, the practice at this point is simply to come back and begin again. Those two words are like a magic mantra: *begin again*. There doesn't have to be any judgment, any assessment, any big story. This is what happens for everyone. We're with the breath for however long, the mind wanders, we become aware of it—begin again, begin again, begin again. It's very simple. It doesn't have to be complicated, and it doesn't have to stimulate any reactivity. This is just the process; this is what happens. And it's the beginning again that strengthens and stabilizes our ability to stay with the breath. We just keep doing it over and over.

Now we begin to go beyond awareness of the actual sensations of the breath. We've established that to some extent—it's not going to be perfect, but we feel connected in some way to the actual sensations. At this point, we want to be aware not only of the sensations of the breath but also to turn our attention to the nuances of our effort. We're actually becoming mindful of *how* we're making effort. This is really important, because if we don't pay attention to that, we'll simply drop into our habitual way of paying attention—which may or may not be skillful.

And so we have to look: how am I making effort?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya was a Burmese monk and meditation master who has taught a lot now in the West. He emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the attitude in our mind about what's being experienced. So it's not only the experience itself—it's looking at how the mind is relating to that experience. And in this context particularly, what is the quality of our effort to be with the breath? We want to pay attention to that.

This is what he said: "You do not need strong effort to be mindful." That should be a relief. You do not need strong effort to be mindful. When we are present, we become aware of what is happening. When we're simply present, being present, we become aware of whatever is arising. Simply reminding yourself to be in the present moment is all the effort you need.

So that's just a good reminder of how to look or how to assess the quality of our effort. Are we giving a little too much force, or are we simply relaxed in the present, naturally aware of the breath, each one, as it presents itself? So that's something to look at. When you're in the meditation, look at how the mind is relating to this.

Then a question arises: how do we remind ourselves to be present? All it takes is being present, but we forget that. So how do we remind ourselves in the midst of our meditation practice?

There are two elements to this exploration. The first of them, which I alluded to briefly, is becoming aware of the breathing process itself. A common tendency for people is that when we're attending to the breath, very often people experience that this initiates some kind of controlling of the breath. When we start to really be with it, somehow the very act of attention on it very often creates some kind of controlling mechanism. We're controlling the breath in some way.

As I'll mention a little later, that itself is not a super big problem, but it is easier and more effortless and relaxed when we don't control the breath. So just a few little suggestions. If you notice that you are controlling—and it can be really subtle, it's not that you're doing heavy breathing, but even just subtle, subtle control or interference with it—if you notice that that's what's happening, there are a couple of ways of stepping back from that and allowing the breath to come in its own natural way.

First, see if you have any preconception of what you think a good breath is. Because people come with all kinds of ideas about meditation, and most of them are useless. We can have some idea: "Oh yeah, when I'm meditating, it's supposed to be calm, and the breath's supposed to be nice and smooth and long and even." And then when it's not—

maybe it was short or rough or agitated or whatever—we try to control it so that it becomes longer and smoother and calmer. That's a mistake, because that's just another kind of control.

Much more helpful not to have any preconception about how any one breath should be. We just settle back, aware of how it is. Do you see how simple this is? The body is breathing. We don't have to do anything. We don't have to make any effort to breathe. There's some miraculous mechanism that keeps us breathing. Even when we're sleeping, the breathing is going on. So can we just settle back in that place of awareness? Oh, this breath is like this. This is a short breath. This is a long breath. This is a calm breath. This is an agitated breath. Just being aware, not trying to control it or make it different than what it is. That would be one thing to look at if you feel that you're controlling it a bit.

Another way of non-control—and this ties into the instruction Tara gave the other morning about "there is a body"—sometimes we're controlling the breath when our focus on it has become too narrow and we're just zeroing in on it. The very act of zeroing in can create some kind of interference. What I've noticed is that if I give myself the bigger framework, like "there is a body," or it could be sounds, you could just be sitting listening to sounds—something that gives a bigger context in which to hold experience.

So if we're resting in that bigger framework, it's easier to allow the breath just to come and go as it does because we're not zeroing in on it. It's easier for the breath to find its own natural rhythm. You might remember to do that if you find yourself creating some interference.

The last thing I'll mention, which is also very common, is that in a pattern of breathing, very often there is a pause between the out-breath and the next in-breath. In, out. In, out. It's not uncommon for people in that pause to want to hurry the next breath along, rather than simply waiting in that space of the pause and noting whatever is present there. We want to pull the next breath in so that we have it there to pay attention to. It's not unusual—we just seem to do this. Become aware of it. Again, it's just much more relaxing and easeful if we allow the breath to find whatever rhythm it's in. In, out, pause. Maybe in the pause you go to sound. Maybe in the pause you go to the whole body posture, or to some touch points where the body is touching the cushion or floor, some other place that you're aware of—just waiting until the next breath comes in its own time.

After doing this, when you practice this for a little while, the mind will begin to relax back from the different ways of controlling or interfering. And as I say, it's not that controlling is so much of a problem, because we could simply be aware of the controlled

breath. We're feeling the breath in that way, and we notice, "Oh, now the breath is controlled." So it's very possible to incorporate even that into the practice. But it is more relaxing and more easeful, and the whole energy system kind of softens when we're not interfering. So it would be worth exploring a bit.

There's a Taoist expression which highlights both the naturalness and the ease of non-interference—not only with the breath, but with our whole life process. I think this is from Lao Tzu: "Sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes and the grass grows by itself." Nature doesn't need us to help it along. Can we just sit quietly, do nothing, but be aware? And spring comes and the grass grows by itself. Everything happens, everything flows.

It might be supportive or encouraging for you to realize that when you're with the breathing, or practicing being with any other experience in this way of just letting things come and go in their own time—no rushing, no pushing, no pulling in, just back and open and receptive—every time we're doing this, we're really learning to trust the Tao. I just like that as a concept. There's something profound going on even in this very simple exercise.

So the next step in right effort, and this is particularly what I've been exploring recently in my practice—I found it really engaging. What's so strange to me about this whole process is, and you'll see, what I'm about to say is exceedingly simple, things I've heard for the last fifty years. But as we go, as we just keep our practice going, we can hear the same thing over and over, and then all of a sudden we hear it in a different way. We apply it in a different way. That's what keeps happening as we continue in our practice, and that's what makes it so rich. It's just a continual unfolding.

At this point, we've learned to be with the actual sensations of the breath. We've begun to watch our attitude about it—whether we're striving too much or over-efforting, whether we're pulling things in or not, whether we're controlling. So we've done all that kind of work. Now the emphasis is on the intention to have the mind be steady for the entire duration of even a single breath.

It's not enough to come into the hall with the intention, "Okay, I'm going to be with my breath for the next hour." Hopeless. Way beyond our capacity. So we make the intention, and then it doesn't work, and then again we feel disappointed or struggling or whatever. It's only because our intention was way beyond what we actually can do.

But I think everyone here has the capacity to set the intention for a single in-breath—to stay really steady on it for just that duration. "Okay, I'm going to really be close, feeling this steadily for one in-breath." And then for one out-breath. And then for one in-breath. And then for one out-breath. When we do this over and over again, this steadiness of attention becomes the default habit of our minds.

It becomes the habit of how we pay attention, because we've been practicing in a very specific and precise way for short durations.

An often unnoticed obstacle in practice to the steadiness of mind is an experience which I call the meditative disease of more or less mindful—where we're kind of mindful, we're not totally lost, we're kind of there, but not fully. I've noticed very often this common experience: we can be with the breath or a step in walking, and we are aware of the breath, we are aware of the step, but at the same time the mind is thinking about something. It's almost like there are two parallel tracks going on. Technically the mind is going quickly back and forth, but experientially it feels like they're happening simultaneously. We're walking and thinking, we're kind of with the breath but not completely.

It's very easy for this to go unnoticed because there's enough mindfulness of the step or the breath to fool us into thinking we're really being mindful—and so we don't really pay attention to the fact that all these thoughts are going along at the same time, in those moments taking us away from the breath.

I've been appreciating the word "intentionality" rather than "effort" in this situation, because somehow it feels more inviting. As I said in the beginning, the word effort has so many connotations for us, and some of them are not that helpful. But when I think that there's this intentionality dial in the mind, and we can actually—if we notice that we're in this more or less mindful state—just slightly turn up that dial of intentionality at the beginning of each sitting, at the beginning of each breath.

At first you might actually formulate it as words in the mind, but that's just as a beginning. After a while you don't even need the words. But in the beginning it might be, "Okay, I'm going to be steady with this breath for the entire duration." You're really setting that intention. You do a few breaths and notice how that is. Is the mind really closer and more steady? Or is it still somewhat going off on that parallel track of thinking? If it is, then the next breath you just turn the dial of intentionality just a little bit.

This is the art. It doesn't take much. It takes the slightest effort, the slightest turning up of that intention. And it has been amazing to me how responsive the mind can be to the setting of that intention—that within a very few breaths in doing this repeatedly, at

least for some time, the mind actually does settle into that more complete, full, uninterrupted experience. But it has to be for a duration that's within our capacity. So maybe it's just the in-breath, and then set the intention for just the out-breath. Or maybe if you're really adept, you could do both an in and out-breath. But not more than that. And then reset the intention.

Everything I'm saying about the breath and setting the intentionality to stay with it fully—noticing when we're not, noticing when we start getting into that more or less mindful space and then upping the intention a little bit—all of this is equally applicable to everything else. You can apply this in walking, in eating, in taking a mouthful of food. It's a general principle for how to actualize the deepening and strengthening of both concentration and mindfulness.

As I said, it's a quicker process than you might imagine if you practice in this way. If you don't, and we're just going along with the practice, even when we're in that more or less mindful state, mindfulness is there and we're learning and the practice is deepening—but it's a much slower process because our attention on this very subtle level is divided. I've been amazed, and again this is kind of recent, at how powerful it is and how immediately effective it is when we set the intentionality to be steady with each small unit of experience.

Is it clear what I mean by the steadiness of mind? That it's just on the object, not in that more or less place. This really transforms the practice.

Very likely you'll be interested enough to try this. And then I could well imagine you try it a little bit and the mind gets bored with it, or you fall back into the old pattern of more or less mindfulness. So don't expect it to be perfect just as you begin this practice. But I think you will have enough of an experience, even for short periods of time, of how effective it is—which will hopefully be an inspiration for you to apply this more and more often in the practice.

This fullness of attention has many benefits.

This is a powerful shift. It's a level jump, a significant deepening of the practice when the mind drops into this level of steadiness. And there are many, many benefits from it. It can save a lot of times of distress.

I'll just tell you one story. This goes back, I think it was 1985. I was doing a retreat in Nepal with Sayadaw U Pandita. And the conditions in the monastery there were terrible. There were about five of us in one room, sleeping on a cement floor with just whatever mat we had happened to bring with us. The food was not that great. The room was right next to the latrine, so all the odors were coming in. It was just... There's

a travel book written by the Australian Bruce Chatwin, and the title is *What Am I Doing Here?* — an account of all the horrible places he went as a travel writer. That question can often come up in the middle of the day: What am I doing here?

So I go into Sayadaw U Pandita and I kind of report what my experience is, the kind of grumbling in my mind. And all he said to me was, "Be more mindful. Be more mindful." And my first thought was, "Thanks a lot. Don't you realize how bad the conditions are?" But that's all he said.

So I went outside and thought, well, he's this great teacher and this is what he told me. Why don't I try it? I was doing walking meditation, and I just became more mindful in exactly the way I've been talking about — more deeply connected, not in that more-or-less place where I could be walking and still having all these thoughts about how terrible the conditions were. Just fully, fully in the experience of the sensations of movement. And all of those distressing mind states completely disappeared. There was no room for them. The mind got more concentrated, it got more peaceful.

It was amazing. It was just the most simple and one could even say generic instruction, but it hit exactly the right point. Because a lot of our distress and difficult emotions comes when we're not really being carefully mindful.

So explore this for yourself. You should not believe anything I say. You really shouldn't, because that doesn't get any place. Everything I say is just an invitation for you to look for yourself. These are just suggestions that I've found helpful over the years of my practice. Try it out and just see if it helps you. And you may discover your own ways of deepening. Take it in that spirit. It's all an exploration.

As I said, if we're monitoring the quality of our effort — which is an important step, actually being mindful of how we're making effort — then we'll notice. Is it too tight? I need to relax a bit. Is it too loose? I need to up the ante a little bit. This is a continual adjustment. You want to be paying attention to this, so we're not just coasting along in the habit pattern of how we pay attention. We're really taking that itself as an object of meditation, because that's how it can be refined and developed.

One more way of dropping into the continuity and immediacy of experience. It's very interesting... You shouldn't be doing this, but I'm going to report my experience of doing it. When I'm walking through the center and just watching people, it is so clear when people are really mindful of their movement and when they're not. It's completely obvious.

And it's common, because we're so often — especially in transition times of going from one activity to another, or in the midst of some activity that we need to get done — we get into this rushing mode of leaning forward. "I have to get from here to the dining room," or "I have to rush through my yogi job," or whatever. So it's very easy, even in the context of a meditation retreat, to be moving about quite unmindfully because we're caught up in our idea of what we're supposed to be doing or where we're going, and not really settled deeply into the experience of getting there.

So one way of doing this is in the walking. As I mentioned, sometimes we can be aware just of the fact that we're moving, but we can also be aware of the sensations involved in the movement. It's a different level of embodiment. In the first, we're kind of there—we know we're moving, so it's not that we're totally lost—but we're not fully embodied. But if as we're walking we are actually in touch with, actually feeling the sensations of the movement, that really gets us to the inside of our body, so to speak. We're really full in the experience of it.

That makes a huge difference. I've noticed for myself in practice that when I'm moving about embodied in that way, the practice is much more continuous. And when I'm up a level, kind of simply knowing I'm moving about but not so deeply connected to the sensations of the movement, it's easier to drift into more or less mindfulness. So that's just another suggestion of how actually to do this.

When Sayadaw U Pandita first came here, the first time he taught was in 1984, and we didn't know him before then. I'm sure you've heard different stories about him—very demanding teacher and inspiring. Many of my friends and colleagues and I were sitting with him, and my colleague Sharon Salzberg was also on the retreat. She told me afterwards that for something like the first weeks of her practice—a month perhaps, it was a three-month retreat—every time she would go in for the interview, all he would say was, "What did you feel when you were brushing your teeth?" Of course, she had no idea. So okay, that was the end of the interview.

She went back and really started paying attention. What actually is being felt? Next time she'd come in ready to report on that, but he wouldn't ask her that anymore. He'd say, "What did you feel when you were brushing your hair?" This went on for weeks. But she said, as tormenting as it was, it really developed the continuity of practice to an immeasurable extent, realizing that everything is equal. Every activity we do, from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep—we divide the day on the schedule, but really it's the same mind-body process going on, and we want to develop that habit of continuous attention.

So continuity, as we've talked about and we'll continue to discuss, is just super important because that's what develops the momentum of mindfulness. We need that momentum. It's the momentum which brings us to that place of real effortlessness in the practice.

I'll give an example I mentioned in the group today. If we're learning to ride a bike and we're just learning how to do it, it wouldn't do any good to say, "Well, just relax, get on the bike, relax, and then just pedal." We're going to fall over. There has to be an initial effort to pedal, to get the bike moving, to get the momentum. And then when the momentum is there, it's possible to just be there and coast for a while, because there's enough momentum and energy to keep it going. But then at another point, that momentum fades, and we really have to start pedaling again to regain it.

It's the same thing in practice. There come times when it becomes completely effortless, and we'll talk about that a little. But we need to develop the momentum of mindfulness to actually get ourselves established there. That's why understanding right effort is so important—the reason I'm talking about it so much tonight. We need to understand how to apply it appropriately at different stages of our practice.

So the first step, as I mentioned: really connecting with the sensations of the breath, checking the attitude of the mind, working with non-interference, then the intentionality to be steady with just an in-breath or an out-breath. All of these things are what help us to build the momentum of our practice.

I want to emphasize that the adjustments we make to our effort and to our intentionality—remember that this is an art. It's very subtle. It doesn't take much. We need the most delicate touch in doing this. It's not to jump in with this big crash of "Okay, I'm going to make all this effort." Just the slightest increase of our intention to be steady will have an effect. A slight understanding that we need to relax a little more is enough.

Pay attention to this. Pay attention to the delicacy with which you adjust the effort. People are often just turning the dial too quickly, too fast, too much, one way or another. It's so subtle, but it has powerful effect.

So we've gotten this far in the practice, it's moving along, we begin to get a sense of the right effort, and we keep adjusting it.

So then at a certain point—which you've probably reached already—what we become aware of are different hindrances in the mind. That's the Buddhist jargon: hindrance. These are seductive mind states that can really take us away from the path.

Walter is going to talk in much more detail about all of these because they're really important to understand more fully. I just want to mention them in passing. There are mind states like desire and aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt. These are the kinds of mind states that really become an obstacle if we don't know how to work with them. And each one has a very unique hook.

It's very interesting. How does aversion grab us? How do we get caught by desire? How do we get seduced by sloth and torpor? It's fascinating to look at these mind states and see: where is the seduction? Because we can know that they're not helpful and yet get caught in them again and again. This is part of the interest of the practice—just exploring our own minds, our own experience.

With regard to the hindrances, there are two general approaches. There's going to be a lot more specific detail, so this is just a general overview.

One style with regard to the hindrances—which are unskillful mind states that just lead to suffering—we might call the effort of the heroic bodhisattva. The Buddha before his enlightenment was called the bodhisattva, the being going towards full awakening. As a bodhisattva, he struggled with the hindrances just like all of us. He was from the warrior caste and had this warrior mode of effort. This is what he said, his expression of his approach: "If the end is attainable by human effort, I shall not rest or relax until it is attained. Let only my skin and sinews and bones remain. Let my flesh and blood dry up. I will not stop the course of my effort until I win that which may be won by human ability, human effort, human exertion."

That's planting the flag. And there's something inspiring about that, to me anyway. Here was somebody for whom that was the appropriate way—just arousing this heroic effort. "I'm going to deal with this." It's said that on the night of his enlightenment, he sat down with the resolve: "I'm not going to get up from this seat until full awakening." Imagine coming into the hall with that resolution. You could try it.

Even if we don't quite reach his level—but that is an approach. There are some people for whom that's the natural way. They're inspired by the challenge of difficulty. "Okay, I'm going to do this." So it would be worth seeing whether that's a part of yourself you could tap into, really arousing that heroic quality of effort.

There's another approach which is quite different. We might call it the approach of the gentle warrior. It's exemplified by Thich Nhat Hanh, whom many of you might know—Vietnamese meditation master, poet, and peace activist, quite an exceptional being. This is what he wrote about anger and aversion: "The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don't suppress it. We don't run away from it. We just breathe and hold

our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. The anger is no longer alone. It is with our mindfulness. If you keep breathing, shining your compassion and understanding on it, your anger will soon crack and you will be able to look into its depths and see its roots."

That's a whole different approach. That's perhaps how a mother would be with her child—maybe the child is having a tantrum,

If the mother happens to be in a mode of patience, you would just be there and supportive. You wouldn't necessarily at that point, if you're in a good space, get angry or get reactive. You wouldn't say they shouldn't be feeling it. It's okay. We would just be there in a loving way with the difficulty, and just that attitude allows it to pass through.

So what's interesting is we know almost instinctively what the right attitude is if we were with a child, but we rarely apply it to ourselves. We rarely think, "Oh, what's the right attitude for me to have with these difficult emotions?" And it's usually not that. Usually we get caught up, we justify them or we judge them, and not just be with it in this loving, tender way.

Both of these approaches are useful for different people and for each of us at different times. If we're filled with a lot of self-judgment or self-hatred or unworthiness—if that has been our conditioning for whatever reason—then this kind of hard-hitting heroic effort, "I'm going to overcome these defilements," may not be the right approach. It may just be increasing the self-judgment. And so if that's our mode, we would want the Thich Nhat Hanh approach: just more gentle, more open, more tender with it.

On the other hand, or at different times, if we're continually indulging these unwholesome states—which can happen, like desires and fantasies or what we feel is justified anger—if we're just endlessly caught up in these, then the more heroic approach might be exactly appropriate. Okay, enough. That can be done without aversion.

At one point in my practice when there were a lot of desire fantasies coming up in my mind, and I saw that they were there—so I was mindful to that extent—but they just kept coming. I was trying lots of different things, and then finally it was almost like taking out the sword of wisdom. Okay, enough. Joseph, do you want to think or get enlightened? I gave myself a talking to. And it helped, because my mind had just gotten too allowing for something that was unhelpful and unskillful.

So do you see how at different times each of these approaches can be helpful? It's not that one is right and one is wrong. We have to see what's appropriate.

Another general framework for understanding different approaches to practice and different applications of right effort involves two approaches which have been called "building from below" or "swooping from above." They're two quite different approaches, but I've found them very interesting.

Building from below starts with an awareness of the suffering that we're in, whatever it is—whether it's physical suffering or psychological, emotional, situational. Building from below really connects us with the reality of our present experience. We're not denying it, we're not trying to cover it, we're not bypassing it. We're really there and we're looking carefully at the nature of the suffering, beginning to work very specifically with the nitty-gritty of our experience—working with the hindrances very directly and seeing how we can free ourselves from them. Building from below connects us with the immediacy of what's happening right now, particularly in times of difficulty or challenge.

Swooping from above begins with a glimpse, or even a momentary recognition, of the open, innate wakefulness of the mind—that there's a quality of awareness or wakefulness that is innate to the mind. We could connect with the mind's essential purity and then practice stabilizing that glimpse.

Do you see the difference? One is just diving into the difficulties and challenges, trying to understand them and work through them. The other, the swooping from above, is we touch or taste or recognize the essential purity of the mind that is already there. It's not something we have to get. We get a glimpse of that, and then we practice stabilizing it.

Both of these approaches are grounded in the teachings of the Buddha.

So one perspective is highlighted where the Buddha said, "I see no beginning to beings who, obstructed by ignorance and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths." This is samsara, beginningless. We've been hurrying and hastening through these rounds of rebirth, fueled by ignorance and ensnared by craving. This is where the building from below comes in—this ignorance has been with us from beginningless time. We have to understand it. We have to really go into it in order to free ourselves.

On the other side, the Buddha talked about the nature of mind being luminous. It is defiled by visiting defilements. The nature of the mind is luminous; it is freed from visiting defilements. In this perspective, the highlight, the understanding, is that the mind

is essentially pure, but the defilements come at certain times, under certain conditions—they are not inherent to the mind. They're visitors to the mind. From that understanding, we can see: can I recognize and rest in the innate purity?

These are the two approaches—building from below, swooping from above. Although given the choice, we would probably all opt for innate purity. Oh yes, let's just rest in the innate purity of mind and sail onward! But it's important to remember that both are simultaneously true. It's not that one is true and one is not. They're both true. And we need to be honest about where we are in our practice and see which perspective at any particular time will help. Because if we apply the wrong perspective, it just creates more suffering.

If our minds are continually distracted, just jumping from one thing to another—that is not uncommon—we're just going along without any stability of attention or awareness. The suggestion "Oh, well, just rest in the natural purity of your mind" is not going to have much meaning. We're not even able to rest with the breath. To give this very high teaching—rest in the purity of the mind—is just not appropriate for where we are. Building from below will be much more helpful. We really go into the hindrances and understand them, developing some facility for freeing ourselves from them.

If, on the other hand, the mind is very self-judgmental and we're caught in a lot of striving and struggling, with tremendous tension in how we're practicing, moments of swooping from above may be exactly the right thing. Just the reminder: "Oh, already aware. There's nothing I have to do to get it. It's already here."

I had this experience on one retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, where striving—its shadow side—made it very easy to fall into striving mode in that system. It has to be done skillfully. But at one point I was caught up in unskillful striving and wanting and expectation. Having been familiar with these other teachings, I just reminded myself in the midst of that struggle: "Oh, Joseph, already aware." It was amazing. Instantaneously, I could feel my mind relax back from all that wanting and expectation.

Do you see how the two approaches really feed each other and support each other? We can use them at different times.

I'll close with two stories. They're actually stories of two Greek myths which illustrate how each of these approaches—swooping from above and building from below—has both a strength and a weakness. The strength of one addresses the weakness of the other, which is why I've found that somehow holding both allows us to navigate skillfully through our experience, applying the appropriate perspective.

The first myth is the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus was a master craftsman of ancient times who was being held on the island of Crete by its rulers, and he wanted to leave. So he crafted wings out of wood, applied feathers, and attached everything with wax. He created a functional wing—this obviously is story and myth—and he was able to fly with these wings. He made a pair also for his son Icarus, since they were both being held captive. Daedalus cautioned his son: "Don't fly too close to the sun, because it will melt the wax." But Icarus, being an enthusiastic young man with his first set of wings, flying through the air, went up toward the sun. Sure enough, the sun melted the wax, and he fell into the sea and died.

If we're using the swooping from above at an inappropriate time or in an inappropriate way, that's what can happen. We think we're applying some high, profound teaching, but we're not in a place at that particular point where it's going to be the right teaching. "Oh yes, it's all pure, it's all innately pure and eternally aware." But if we're not actually in that space and we're just imagining that we're practicing that, we come crashing down.

On the other side, when we need—

that swooping from above. This is a poem from a book called *Parables and Portraits* by Stephen Mitchell, and it's about the story, the myth of Sisyphus. You know he was condemned to roll this huge stone up the mountain, and just as he reached the top, it would fall down to the bottom. His eternal punishment was that endless labor.

So this is Stephen Mitchell's take on this myth, and I really like this:

*We tend to think of Sisyphus as a tragic hero, condemned by the gods to shoulder his rock sweatily up the mountain, and again up the mountain, forever.*

Sometimes our lives may feel like that—we're just endlessly shouldering the struggle of our lives.

*The truth is that Sisyphus is in love with the rock. He cherishes every roughness and every ounce of it. He talks to it, sings to it. It has become the mysterious other. He even dreams of it as he sleepwalks upward. Life is unimaginable without it, looming always above him like a huge gray moon. He doesn't realize that at any moment he is permitted to step aside, let the rock hurtle to the bottom, and go home. Tragedy is the inertial force of the mind.*

This is the other side. We can get so caught in the story of our lives—and we all have our stories—the challenges and the difficulties and the suffering and all of it. That's like the rock that we're pushing up this mountain. And in many ways, just as in Stephen's

interpretation, in some way we have fallen in love with our story, even when it involves a lot of suffering. We just keep on with the same patterns, doing the same thing again and again, which creates the same kind of suffering, not realizing that we're permitted at any time to step aside, let the rock hurtle to the bottom, and go home.

In this example, going home is that connection to the innate purity of mind, to the innate awareness of mind. We don't have to work through every life situation or every struggle or every difficulty through analysis and investigation and all of that—although at times that's what's needed. We don't want to be Icarus trying to fly to the sun at the wrong time and crashing to the earth. But we also don't want to be Sisyphus, endlessly in love with our suffering and our story. We can see that there is a way to actually touch a place of freedom that is always here.

I hope you've gotten some sense of the dimensions of the practice and how right effort is just this exploration: How do I explore this whole domain, from the very specifics of working with the breath and the steadiness of mind and intentionality, to the larger frame of understanding what's our basic relationship and what's the appropriate response to the situations of our lives? Is it building from below, really getting in there and uncovering and discovering? Or is it swooping from above, really having a glimpse, even a taste, of that freedom that is already here?

This is the joy of the practice and the interest of the practice. It's not always easy. It's challenging. But that's okay. It's good to be challenged.

May the merit of our practice and our time together be dedicated to the welfare and the happiness and the awakening of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 48

# Working with Thoughts

Joseph Goldstein · 1h04

> *In this teaching, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of the most pervasive yet overlooked aspects of meditation practice: our relationship to thoughts. He illuminates a profound paradox—when we are unaware that we're thinking, thoughts have tremendous power over us, directing our actions and conditioning our emotions. Yet when we bring mindfulness to thought, we discover they are remarkably empty and insubstantial, arising and passing like sounds or any other phenomena.*
>
> *Goldstein outlines three progressive levels of working with thought. The first is simply acknowledging thinking with a soft mental note. The second involves recognizing predominant patterns—the "top ten tunes" that replay in our minds, such as planning, judging, remembering, and commenting. The third and most profound level involves asking "What is a thought?"—not seeking a conceptual answer, but directing awareness to investigate the nature of thought itself as a phenomenon, apart from its content.*
>
> *Perhaps most transformative is Goldstein's reframing of moments when we "wake up" from being lost in thought. Rather than responding with self-judgment, he encourages practitioners to appreciate these transitions as direct experiences of moving from ignorance to wisdom, from delusion to awareness. This shift—from emphasizing being lost to celebrating being awake—can fundamentally brighten one's practice. He also discusses how to integrate directed attention with choiceless awareness, and how to maintain mindfulness during daily activities, including the simple mantra "each step" for cultivating continuity throughout the day.*

This morning I'd like to talk about one aspect of our experience that is so predominant and so determinative of much of what happens in our lives—an aspect that, even though it's so predominant, we rarely pay careful attention to. It's something that you're very familiar with, and that is how to relate skillfully to all the thoughts or images that are arising in the mind.

As you've seen, and as almost anybody has seen who just sits down even for five minutes and meditates, we become aware of the proliferation of thought in the mind. Ordinarily, in the course of our daily lives, these thoughts come, we get lost in them, caught up in them, often act on them, and even when we don't act on them, they still have the power to condition strong emotions within us. So it's a very powerful force.

What's so amazing about applying mindfulness to thought as an object is that when we are mindful that we're thinking, the thoughts have no power at all. We see them as just this very passing, insubstantial, empty phenomena arising and passing through—just like a sound arises and passes through. And yet when we're not aware that we're thinking, they have this incredible power in our lives. Our thoughts are saying, go here, go there, do this, do that. And we just follow along like puppies on a leash. Our lives are, to a large extent, the unfolding of our relationship to and our acting out of all the conditioned thoughts that are arising.

So it's really important—an important part of the practice is to hone our skill in becoming aware of thoughts as they appear in the mind quicker, closer to the beginning. As we observe thought, we see that we often become aware of them after they're over. We recognize, oh, I've been thinking, and we're looking back at it. Occasionally we can become aware of the thought in the middle. And when the mind is quite clear, we can be aware of a thought just as it's arising. This takes practice—including thought as an object of meditation—so that we're strengthening our ability to be aware of them as close to the beginning as possible.

As with so many other aspects of the practice, there are different levels of attending to thought, and each level has its own benefit, its own use.

For example, the first thing we might want to do, and you probably have been doing this to some extent, is simply being aware that we're thinking. A thought arises in the mind, and as soon as you become mindful of it—at whatever point, whether after it's over, in the middle, or at the beginning—there's a simple acknowledgement. The acknowledgement is strengthened, the habit of awareness is strengthened, by using the soft mental note, particularly with thinking. I think that's one of the arenas where the mental noting is particularly helpful. Simply to make the note, "thinking, thinking"—we're actually acknowledging, yes, this is what's happening—and then coming back to whatever the anchor is.

The next level or step, and you could begin doing this today if you haven't already, is to become aware more specifically of the very common thought patterns. What are the top ten tunes that just keep coming back again and again? For each of us they may be different, although I think it would be surprising to realize how much is in common in terms of the patterns of our thoughts.

For example, how many plans have you made since you've been here? Planning—that's a common tendency. And plans are very seductive. They really pull us in to all these future fantasies of what we need to do or want to do. So keep an eye out for plan-

ning mind, and make that specific note when you see it. You're reinforcing the mindfulness of that pattern, and because it's a common pattern, it will be very useful, very often.

It might be the pattern of judging—either judging others or judging oneself. That would be really useful to see, so that we don't get identified with those judging thoughts. The judgment itself is not a problem. It's a conditioned habit of mind that almost all of us have. The problem arises when we're not aware that it's there and we're identified with it. We're giving the judgment energy from the inside; we're strengthening it through our identification with that thought.

Instead, when we see it as simply a thought arising and passing, when we're seeing the impermanence and emptiness of thought in that way, the content doesn't really matter. The content is very important when we choose to either identify or act on the thought, because that's where the discernment of which thoughts are skillful and which are unskillful is so important. But from the meditative perspective, where we're just watching the phenomena, the passing flow of phenomena, and we're seeing thought just as another arising phenomenon, the content is not important at all. It's just something coming and going.

The reason for naming and labeling, making a soft mental note of the predominant patterns, is that it will help to keep the mind in that place of openness and non-identification with those patterns that arise most frequently for us, that are most seductive for us.

So really look. See how planning, judging, commenting, remembering—so many of our thoughts are really just about past and future. In fact, it would be interesting for you, not exactly to keep count, but just out of interest in the back of your mind, to see if you can become aware of just how many of our thoughts are past and future.

It will really give a strong indication of the challenge of staying in the present, given this conditioning of our thought patterns.

So the next level of awareness of thought—we begin with just "thinking, thinking" as our first acknowledgment. Then, when we feel somewhat comfortable or easeful with practicing mindfulness of thinking, we give a little more attention to the kind of thought, to the predominant patterns. We can give a more specific label.

There's a third level of attending to thoughts, and it's the one which in some way I find the most interesting. When there are a lot of thoughts happening, when we're in a stream of thought, that would be a particularly good time to ask a question of oneself that almost nobody ever asks. It's a very unusual question for people going through life. And the question is, as we're in this stream of thinking, to ask: What is a thought?

Not what is the thought saying—so we've dropped from the level of content—but what actually is a thought as a phenomenon? To me, this is fascinating because it's such an interesting phenomenon.

When thoughts are happening and we're asking the question, "What is a thought? What is this?" we see quite quickly—this does not take years of practice to see—we see how ephemeral and empty and insubstantial a thought is. We're just sitting, feeling the breath, feeling the body. A thought arises, and if we're attentive to the fact that thinking is present, well, what is that? It's actually little more than nothing. It's just this tiny little energy condensation into words, something like that. There's not much there.

And we can see this. We can see, when we're mindful of it, that just in that moment of awareness the thought often will disappear because we're not feeding it, we're not identified with it, we're not lost in it.

So this to me is what's quite remarkable as a particular phenomenon: when we are unaware that we're thinking, the thoughts dominate our lives. They're such a powerful force. They're directing us. It's like they're little dictators of the mind. And yet when we are aware of them, we see that there is really almost nothing there. It's just this little burst of thought energy that comes and goes and has no impact at all.

This shows, in a very immediate way, the power of mindfulness. Without it, we're just lost in our stories. And with it, we can see thought itself as being so empty and insubstantial and transparent and without much power at all.

So I would suggest, if you're interested in this investigation, instead of seeing a proliferation of thoughts as a problem, you could use that time—since thoughts at a particular moment may be predominant—as a good opportunity to really look. You're having lots of chances to ask the question, "What is this? What is a thought?"

It's not so much that the purpose of the question is to come up with an answer. This is not really a metaphysical question. The question is simply a way of directing the mindfulness and awareness to look directly at the nature of thought itself as a phenomenon, not the content. On this level, it's not about the content. It's just about what the thought is in itself.

So these are a few of the levels, if you're taking interest in this arena. First, just to be aware that you're thinking. Then, acknowledging the content of the predominant pattern—planning, remembering, judging, whatever. And third, asking, "Well, what is a thought?" Just explore out of your own interest in this.

There are a few other elements of working with thought that can really enliven your practice. First, to become aware of what your habitual response is to becoming aware that you've been thinking. We're sitting with the body, with the breath, with different sensations—we're opening the field. A thought comes, we're not aware of it, we get caught up in the train of association, we're carried along for a while, and then at a certain point we wake up from being lost.

It would be interesting for you to see: what's your first reaction when you wake up from being lost? The first reaction is often just rushing back to whatever the object is, our normal anchor. We wake up from being lost in the thought, and we hurry back to the breath.

So that's a normal response. Or we wake up from being lost in thought and then have—even if it's just a small moment—self-judgment: "Lost again. I'll never get this."

There's a third alternative, which will turn all of that around. It involves understanding that for as many times as you've been lost, exactly that many times do you wake up—because nobody is lost in thought forever. So pay attention to that moment of going from the delusion or ignorance of being lost, where something is happening and we don't know it's happening, to the moment when we emerge from the thinking process. Right in that moment of transition—from being lost to becoming awake—that's a very powerful and instructive moment. We can experience directly, not theoretically, that we have just gone from ignorance to wisdom, from delusion to awareness. We've actually had that experience every time we wake up from being lost in a thought.

So don't just skip over it. Actually highlight it: "Oh, being lost felt like this. Being awake feels like this." We're highlighting the difference in our experience of these two states—being lost in a thought versus being aware that we're thinking. This gives us a very immediate understanding of what awareness is, what ignorance is, what being lost is, what being awake is. And in these moments, this is not conceptual. We're actually having that experience.

So every time you wake up from being lost in some thought chain, it would be helpful if you could recondition your habit—going from self-judgment, "lost again," to appreciation: "Oh, awake again." Highlight the experience: "I've been lost and now the

mind is awake, it's aware." And if you're really connected and paying attention to what that wakefulness feels like, as opposed to the delusion of having just been lost and caught, there is a great delight in all these moments of waking up.

You can have a sitting where you almost turn your whole assessment machine around. It's almost appreciating all the many times you've been lost when you're highlighting that each of those times is also a moment to appreciate the wakefulness. "Oh good, awake again." Then the mind brightens. This could give you many moments of delight in a sitting, because we get lost a lot. But instead of emphasizing the lost part, emphasize the awake part.

It really energizes the practice and serves as a reminder of what we're doing here. It takes us beyond the practice as a technique to the practice as a vehicle for direct learning about our experience. We're going from the methodology of mindfulness to what we learn from being mindful. And this is a powerful learning—this contrast, this real understanding of the difference between ignorance and delusion versus wakefulness and awareness. It's right in those moments of transition, just in that moment when we wake up from being lost, that this becomes very clear.

So this will be a very rich domain for you to explore. We'll go on in subsequent days—there's a very direct connection between thought and emotion. In the next few days we'll be talking about including all the emotions that arise in the practice as objects of mindfulness meditation. Then it gets very rich, exploring the whole emotional terrain: how we relate to the emotions, whether we're identified with them or not, what conditions different emotions. You really begin to understand the dynamic of thought and emotion and how they are mutually interdependent, conditioning each other. There's a lot. It's an incredibly rich practice as we open up to all these different arenas of our experience.

Okay, so you can just take your comfortable posture. Settling into the body—there is a body—creating that larger framework, and always keeping it very simple. There is a body. Feeling yourself sitting, and whatever arises within that frame: there is a body.

You'll often naturally feel the body breathing, because that's always going on. Let the breath be however it is. It's not a breathing exercise; it's an exercise in awareness. Not pulling the next breath in, but letting it find its own time. Mindful of any particular bodily sensations that call your attention. Opening to them, feeling them, seeing how they change.

When you're with the breath, set that intention at the beginning of each breath to stay steady for the entire duration of that single breath. Really playing with that intentionality dial. Staying alert for the arising of thoughts and images in the mind in just the ways I've been talking about.

He often uses the example of light awareness—the fact that it doesn't require much force. He suggests that people simply become aware of seeing. When you turn your attention to seeing, does it take any effort to be seeing, or to be aware that we're seeing when we remember? There's no forcing or tightening or particular effort needed other than to be present.

But that "other than to be present" is a significant clause.

This relates to what I was talking about last night—really examining how we're making effort. Is there a kind of agenda in the mind, or a wanting, or an expectation? Or are we simply being present and aware of what's arising? That's very simple. That's very light in that sense.

But this lightness of attention is not in contradistinction to a continuous steadiness on the object. These are two different things. We can have the light awareness and still have that intentionality to settle into the experience, even of a single breath or a single step, with unbroken attention.

They're different because they're referring to two distinct qualities. One is the steadiness of continuity, and one is the energy with which we're paying attention. He'll often use that phrase "light awareness" and distinguish it from what I would call an over-intense focusing. It's not, "Okay, I'm going to be attentive to the breath!" It's not that. It's light in that sense—settled back, receptive, letting experience come. He has a certain Taoist approach in terms of lightness, just seeing the emptiness of it all. But being more or less mindful isn't about that. It's about how steady we are in whatever the experience is.

I'll say one more thing related to this. People often have the question: when should I really have a directed awareness on the breath or a movement—when we're choosing an object to be with—and what's the relationship of that to open, choiceless awareness, where we're not choosing but simply open to whatever is arising?

Both of these are important components of the practice, and they interweave with one another. It's not one or the other—it's both.

It's important to develop a foundation of steadiness by attending to a primary object, whatever it may be. It could be the breath, it could be something else. The effort to come back to it, to keep the mind steady—this is the development of one-pointedness, of undistractedness, of steadiness of mind. We could practice this alternation within one sitting or over a period of time.

We establish some level of stability, and then we open up to a more choiceless mode. Whatever's arising, we're just paying attention to that without a primary object at that time. But then, in practicing this more choiceless awareness, almost everybody will feel a certain diminishment of stability after some time. That's the moment to come back to a more directed awareness. Establish that steadiness. Then return to open awareness.

This is very intuitive. There's no formula for it. Just feel into your own practice and see what's appropriate at a particular time, knowing that both are important and they feed each other. They're interwoven.

Depending on the activity we're engaged in, there are different levels of mindfulness that are appropriate. When we're engaged in some conceptual process—often a creative process—we may want to allow the mind to free associate, to open to a wide range of what might come up, because that's of value in that activity. Or if you're trying to read a book, for example, if you're going "seeing, seeing, seeing," you're not going to get very far.

And after a while, you're just seeing black on white.

So we have to acknowledge that there are times when we want to be engaged on the conceptual level, that that's what's appropriate to the activity we're engaged with. But there is a kind of mindfulness—and my first teacher, Munindraji, spoke of this—which could be applicable even at those times, when we're allowing the mind that freedom of wandering or free association.

He called it a kind of general mindfulness that's not specific and not pinpointed. It's just a general mindfulness in the background which will become aware whenever an unwholesome mind state arises within that activity. So it's not interfering with the activity, but there's enough awareness to know if the mind gets triggered into a reactivity of wanting or greed or judgment—whatever it is that is not wholesome, not skillful—that general mindfulness will pick it up. And at that point we might think, "Oh, what's going on here?" At that point we might step out of that process and really examine in a more careful way. But when that is not happening, then we just let it go for that period of time, for that activity.

Now, someone might ask: is walking in nature something to be avoided, since it seems a form of wandering? No, the walking in nature is not the problem. That can actually be very beautiful, and the Buddha spoke a lot in praise of being in the forest and the peace of it and being in nature. So that can be a beautiful aspect of our practice. But applying the practice at that time is exactly the same as what we do in the whole sitting.

As you're walking through nature, you want to be aware of your moment-to-moment experience. And just as I was talking about a few moments ago, there could be this interweaving. For some time you could really be in the body, feeling each step, just like you were doing walking meditation, but maybe at a little faster speed. You're walking, attending to the feeling of the body moving. The mind wanders, you get caught up in some thought, become aware of it, and then come back to the movement.

You could start, for example, with that kind of attentiveness, and then at a certain point, if you feel the mind somewhat steady and present, you could be walking through the woods with a more open awareness, where moment after moment you're simply receiving what arises. There's a question to hold in the mind that can help bring awareness into that place of openness. Whether sitting or walking, in formal meditation or walking in the woods, you hold the question moment after moment: what is being known? Just, what is being known?

In holding that question, you'll see a very rapid flow of different phenomena through all the sense doors. You're walking and the feeling of the body is being known, a sound is being known, a sight is being known, and then feeling the body again. Maybe you feel peaceful, and so that mind state is being known. With that question, it just allows us to settle back in a very open, receptive way to the whole range of phenomena happening through the six sense doors. In Buddhism, it's the five physical senses and the mind.

Then, as you're walking through the woods in that more open awareness, maybe you'll find that the mind's losing its steadiness and you're just getting carried away in thought trains. So then come back to a more directed awareness, feeling specifically the movement of the body, the movement of each step. In a way, it's the same practice whether you're in the woods or you're in the hall.

I think we need to go. There will be interviews scheduled. But I just want to leave you with a mantra of continuity that you can use to remind yourself. It's very simple—a two-word mantra: *Each step.* That's the mantra. Each step.

Remind yourself to be mindful of each step. And it's not only in walking meditation. It's going from the hall, leaving the hall, going to your walking spot. Each step. And what that will do—and you can even add this awareness—is work against the tendency,

the very slight energetic tendency to be rushing or leaning forward, to be ahead of ourselves. Especially as we're in transition going from one place to another, it's just so common to think, "Okay, now I'm in my walking spot." But you were always in your walking spot. So don't wait. You don't have to wait for a special spot.

Each step.

Have fun.

CHAPTER 49

# Q&A: Integrating Practice, Right Speech, and Love No Matter What

Joseph Goldstein · 1h03

> *In this Q&A session from an insight meditation retreat, Joseph Goldstein offers practical guidance for practitioners at various stages of their journey. He begins by addressing how newcomers can integrate intensive retreat practice into everyday life, emphasizing the importance of establishing a regular daily sitting practice and undertaking the cultivation of sammā vācā (right speech). He introduces the concept of samphappalāpa—useless talk—as a particularly fruitful area for mindfulness practice, noting how restraining unnecessary speech conserves energy and builds integrity.*
>
> *Goldstein explores the nature of thoughts from both relative and ultimate perspectives, explaining how we can appropriately attend to meaningful content while also recognizing the momentary, insubstantial nature of all mental phenomena. He draws on Joseph Campbell's description of the Buddha's enlightenment from "Hero with a Thousand Faces" to illustrate the quality of a mind that remains unmoved amidst all experience.*
>
> *The talk deepens into the practice of karuṇā (compassion) and its relationship to mettā, the distinction between greed-based wanting and wholesome aspiration, and the meaning of dispassion as non-identification rather than disengagement. Goldstein concludes with a powerful reflection on forgiveness, sharing how the teaching "love no matter what" from Father Gregory Boyle's work with gang youth transformed his own relationship to conflict and harm, offering a path beyond the contracted prison of being right toward the spacious freedom of unconditional love.*

So tonight, only easy questions.

Tara and Walt will be having microphones to hand to you when you ask a question so that way everyone can hear it and I won't need to repeat.

Anybody?

*Question: This is my first retreat, so just a little context. I was wondering if you could offer some advice as far as what may work and what wouldn't, if I plan to integrate these teachings into a more general context—maybe a science-forward mindfulness practice post-retreat. I think I first learned of you and got some of your energy from the 10% Hap-*

*pier route. I'm kind of concerned with how all-encompassing this practice seems here, with the long sits and so many levels and such a rich history. How do I not water that down so that it's useless, but incorporate it into shorter practices?*

First, I should say that some of that will be addressed tomorrow night because my four colleagues are going to be speaking, each one about a particular *pāramī*. The *pāramīs* are the perfections that the Buddha developed to become a Buddha. It's a whole list, and they're really qualities that can and should be brought into our lives. So there'll be more of that tomorrow evening.

But just briefly: there are a few things that are really important in terms of carrying the practice forward. One is a daily sitting practice. The regularity is more important than the length. That being said, you want to sit longer than five minutes. If you can sit an hour a day, that would be great. If you can sit two hours a day, that would be great. Maybe it's half an hour. But really try to establish a routine and a rhythm where that just becomes part of your life. It's really important because it sets the day up. There's more of a chance of carrying mindfulness throughout all the busyness of the day. And it's a touchstone each day into the depths and the fullness of whatever you experienced here.

Another huge arena of practice would be really undertaking the practice of right speech, because we speak a lot. It's a major use of our energy in the course of our lives, in the course of a day. And mostly—I'm sure you recognize this—mostly in our speech, the words just come tumbling out. It's not that often much attention is paid to the motivation behind what we're saying. So somebody came up with this acronym: WAIT. W-A-I-T. Why Am I Talking? Before we speak, wait—even if it's just for a moment. Instead of just being on the forward momentum of that energy tumbling out.

The Buddha talked about four different kinds of wrong speech. I'll just back up a minute. There's one list of ten wholesome and ten unwholesome actions. Obviously the wholesome are to be cultivated and the unwholesome to be avoided. Four of the ten are about speech. So this is not insignificant. This is a core part of our practice, which obviously can be undertaken more effectively out of retreat than in retreat, since you don't talk that much here.

Some kinds of wrong speech are obvious: not lying, not harsh speech, not slander, gossip, things like that. But there's one category which I love to practice with. The Pāli word for its English translation is *samphappalāpa*. The English translation is "useless talk." I mean, it sounds just like what it is: *samphappalāpa*.

I find it so interesting, just in our social interactions. I can be hanging out with friends, and so often the conversation will be going on and I'll see this impulse to say something totally useless. Basically, it's just a way of saying, "Here I am." That's the only point of those particular words.

So I really try to keep an eye out for the impulse to *samphappalāpa*. And in those moments when I'm successful, I say, "No, I don't have to say this." First, it feels like a great victory over Māra. Māra is the embodiment of delusion in the Buddhist texts, trying to keep us ensnared in unwholesome activities. Defeated Māra in this moment! But even more than that, the felt sense of that restraint is a conservation of energy, and you can feel it. Instead of just our energy spilling out in a useless way—we're about to do it, then no, I don't have to do it—there's more integrity in the being.

So right speech, and just paying attention to that. When you go home, if you want to do some reading about it, you might explore different books about Buddhism, even books on the basic Eightfold Path. Right speech is one of them, and you might explore in greater depth just through some reading all the various aspects of it. That would be a big area.

I think that's enough for now because tomorrow night people are going to be speaking about other kinds of practices to do in our lives outside. Daily sitting, right speech...

*A question from a participant: What can one expect if they go on a one-month or a three-month retreat like the ones offered here? Or perhaps what should one consider before committing to such a long retreat?*

You can expect more of the same—which should be encouraging, because if you made it this far in this retreat, you'll be fine. Especially if you don't have expectations of anything else. That being said, over time and over a longer period, there's a chance to strengthen the concentration. Often people will see a deepening of the concentration, a greater continuity of practice, all the things we've been talking about here. But there's just a longer time to cultivate them, and because of that, they get stronger.

It's very valuable. If there's an interest and an opportunity in your lives, as you can imagine, I'm a big fan of intensive practice, just because it's so rare to have the opportunity to investigate this mind-body in this way. It's a really precious opportunity, and the long retreats—they're great, not always happy. It's really just like this, the same ups and downs. Some sittings will be really clear and calm and quiet, and others will be turbulent and restless. But over time, day after day after day, we really learn a balance behind all those changes. Instead of being whipsawed, thrown about by all the changes and the ups and downs, we develop quite a stability in being with those changes.

There's a book about the Buddha's life written by Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of world myths. He wrote this book called *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and he used the Buddha's life as the archetype of the journey towards awakening. In this book there's a very beautiful, mythopoetic description of the night of the Buddha's enlightenment, as he was sitting under the tree, assailed by all the forces of Māra—both the seductions, the sense delights, and also the fearsome aspects. All of these energies came to assail the Bodhisattva. And there's one line that Joseph Campbell wrote in describing that scene. This one line has really stuck with me in terms of being a beautiful expression of what our practice is actually about.

As the Bodhisattva, as he was known before his enlightenment, was assailed by all of these forces, Joseph Campbell wrote: "And the mind of the great being was not moved."

I love that. The mind of the great being was not moved. Can you imagine the beauty and the power and the steadiness and the openness of a heart-mind like that? Whatever life presents—stillness, peace, openness.

So that's really the direction we're going in—we learn to be less and less moved, less reactive, one could say, to the events, whether in meditation or in our lives.

A question came about the nature of thought. Several times I've mentioned how thoughts are empty, and how cutting at the root of them is simply recognizing that thought has no true nature. Throughout this week in dealing with thoughts, one person found that some thoughts can simply be labeled—planning, fantasy—and they're very easy to let go. In those thoughts, one can see, "Oh, okay, empty." The content carries no meaning or significance. But then there are other thoughts where the content, usually with an emotional charge, seems much more evidently meaningful or relevant to one's life. When those arise, one might either sit with them and try to feel into them, or make a note that this is something to meditate on at a later time. For some thoughts, the content seems evidently meaningful and worth pondering—perhaps past actions, how to make them right, or something of that sort. Can I speak to the emptiness of thoughts in this way?

This really points to one framework of understanding experience. I can't remember whether we've spoken about this explicitly, but it's the framework of relative truth and more ultimate truth. On the relative level, the contents of thoughts are worth paying attention to—in both ways. Either because they're meaningful and worth pursuing in one way or another, or we see the content as meaningless and let them go. But we're actually attending to the content. So that, we could say, is on the relative level. On the more

ultimate level, it's there that we're seeing the momentariness, the insubstantiality, the ephemeral nature of thoughts. From that perspective, the content is irrelevant. We're just seeing the thought as a phenomenon that comes and goes.

Our practice is the union of the relative and the ultimate. It's not like they're two separate things. It's the same phenomena seen from different levels. And in our practice—and I think it can become quite intuitive—we sense when it's appropriate to pay attention to the relative level, and when it's appropriate to really stay on the more ultimate level of just seeing the momentary change.

Just as an example of the importance of the relative: in the years I was practicing in India, it was in Bodh Gaya, which is a small village but the place where the Buddha was enlightened, so it's a significant spiritual site. In the village, one of the big landowners had a working elephant, as you can sometimes see in India. So sometimes I'd be walking into the village, and the elephant would be walking the other way. I always stepped out of its path. I did not just say "seeing, seeing, seeing." Sometimes the application of the relative is absolutely appropriate.

It gets a little trickier in the examples that were given, in terms of when we're sitting and different thoughts come and the content does seem meaningful in some way. There are a variety of ways to handle it. One approach is to simply make a note, mark it, and say, "Okay, I'm going to really reflect on this later." If it feels very compelling in the moment—and sometimes it's so compelling we don't really have a choice—we get involved in some reflection about it, and that would be okay. I would just be watchful that it's very time-limited while we're sitting, because it would be easy to spend the hour just in reverie about it. But if you spend five minutes or so, some brief amount of time just trying to highlight the main points of its significance, which could then be taken up later, I think that would be fine.

Very often, certain kinds of thoughts become seductive—not only the personal thoughts arising from our own lives, but a very seductive thought pattern consists of Dharma thoughts. I've spent hours sitting just reflecting on Dharma thoughts. And I justified it to myself by saying, "Well, this is the Dharma." But it was really just thinking. Sometimes those kinds of thoughts happen when we have a certain insight. In our meditation we're going along and we see something really interesting, or clearly perceive some aspect of the teaching that becomes very obvious. The insight then becomes the initiative for thinking about it.

I've mentioned in a couple of my groups: have you ever chewed sugar cane? When you're in the tropics, they'll often sell little stalks of sugar cane on the streets, and you chew them, and the first few chews are very juicy and sweet. But after three or four

chews, it becomes dry pulp, and then you spit it out and take another piece. So with these Dharma thoughts, where we're really reflecting on maybe an insight or an understanding—we can generally extract the juice of the insight in the first few minutes. And then it becomes a lot of repetitive thinking about it.

That's the dry pulp. And so we don't want to spend time in that.

In your personal practice, do you have an intention for every time you sit?

Sometimes. And it really covers the range.

For example, there was a time in my practice where I spent a year just doing metta practice. That was my intention for each sit, and that's what I did. At other times, I had an intention that I really wanted to work on concentration and one-pointedness. So the intention for that sit would be to up the intentionality dial, just with the breath—just do that. Sometimes the intention has been to sit in an open awareness, a more choiceless awareness, so the sitting would then follow that.

But perhaps most often—and those are specific examples—what I find is that I sit and really trust the intuition of the movement between a directed awareness, for example on the breath or some other single object, and a more open, choiceless awareness. So even within one sitting, I may start with really attending to the breath, and then at a certain point—and it's very intuitive, there's not a formula for it—but after some time, it just feels like, "Oh, this is the moment to open up." And then it becomes more choiceless. And then at a certain point, that intuition might suggest it's good to refocus just on the breath. So there's a very easeful interweaving of the two. The sitting is often like that.

Can you talk more about compassion practice?

The metta practice and compassion practice are related, but they have a slightly different flavor and a slightly different phraseology. And also a different field of beings.

When we're doing metta, we start out with the individual categories, and then finally we move up to all beings. Metta really is for all beings, that well-wishing. Compassion is addressed primarily to the suffering of beings. Metta is just the feeling of goodwill for everybody, whether they may be in a happy state—we're just wishing well to all.

The phrase for compassion that we use is a single phrase, rather than three or four phrases. And the phrase is simply, "May you be free of suffering."

We start with a first category where we visualize somebody either known to us personally or maybe just from the news—someone who's in a lot of suffering. That's what we're visualizing because with that person, in this framework, it's easy to feel compassion. We can intuit or feel or see the actual suffering that's there. And so the wish, "May you be free of suffering," really has a deep meaning.

Generally, compassion practice is addressed to those suffering beings. In one way it also becomes universal, because on one level we're all suffering. So in that sense, it could be extended to anybody. But it particularly highlights beings who are in a situation of particular suffering.

What's really interesting about doing this practice—one might think that visualizing beings really in a lot of pain or difficulty or perhaps terrible circumstances, and expressing this wish, "May you be free of suffering"—it might sound like, even though it's a good thing to do, it's a downer because we're filling our heart and mind with the suffering of other beings. But it's quite extraordinary.

When we actually do the practice, even though it's all about suffering and the wish to be free of it, the practice is hugely uplifting. There's a certain kind of—joy is not the right word, but it's not a downer, it's an upper. Because compassion is such a beautiful quality. When we tune into it, it's an ennobling quality. And to cultivate that for over an hour at a time, or sometimes people do intensive metta or compassion retreats where that's all they're doing all day long—it really opens the heart a lot. So it's a little different than metta, although you can see that it's related, but it's quite specifically oriented towards the suffering, either our own or others, and that wish: may you be free of it.

Can you talk a little bit about the difference between wanting things in your life and pursuing them, and craving?

One of the problems is that in English, the word wanting—or desire—can have a wide range of meanings. It covers a lot of different mind states. It's not a single mind state. We might say, "I want to get enlightened," or "I want to be more compassionate," or "I want that second scoop of ice cream." Those are very different mind states. One is a little more tinged with greed, and the other may be a really beautiful aspiration. So the mind state is very different even though the word we use is the same. I think you need to look in each of those situations where you're using the word "I want" to say, okay, what is the quality in the mind that this word is expressing?

Let me back up a minute. Living as lay people in the world, we live in the world of sense pleasures, and that's totally fine. We haven't chosen to live monastic lives with that level of renunciation. So we shouldn't hold that model up necessarily for how we should be living as lay people. We could, but it's not necessary.

When we look at the wants we have as lay people in the world, some will be of the non-greed variety—like coming here, or a noble aspiration of desire. But others will have some degree of greed in them. So I think what we want to do in this situation is really monitor the degree of greed. Are we really obsessing about this thing?

There's a little sequence of phrases that might help illuminate this. This came in a very specific example for one of my wants: "I want, I need, I must have." That's going to the greed side, where it just becomes so intense. The basic want for a basically innocuous pleasure—I don't see that as being a big problem.

Although, even in that, as lay people, it is interesting at least to practice—more for the fun of it or the game of it—moments of renunciation, just to see what it's like. We have a desire for a cup of tea or something. It's not that there's anything wrong with having a cup of tea, so it's not about that. It's just about exercising that renunciation muscle—the ability, when we see a wanting that doesn't particularly serve us, to not be compelled to act on it. We actually have some inner space to see: do I really want this or not? Do I need it? It just opens up a lot more space.

So it's about monitoring, even in those situations when the greed factor is present—which is going to be there in our lives until we are at the third stage of enlightenment. That's when desire is uprooted. All the time before that, it's going to be there. And it's not a question of having some ideal that it shouldn't arise. It is going to arise. But can we sort of keep it in balance? That's how I see it.

Of course, are you familiar with the Buddhist personality types? There are three personality types—it's a personality map within the Buddhist teachings. There's the greed type, the aversive type, and the deluded type. We all have the mix, but for many of us, one or another is predominant.

I'm firmly in the greed type. "Oh, I like that. Oh, that's nice. Oh, that would be good." Whereas the aversive type sees things differently: "Oh, that's no good. That's no good. That's no good." They're more prone to anger, while the greed type is more prone to desire. And the deluded type doesn't quite know what's going on.

I find this framework useful, though you want to hold it lightly. There's a certain value in it, both in seeing oneself and others, because it depersonalizes things. "Oh yeah, that's just this personality tendency showing itself."

We have a guiding teacher council here at IMS—I think there are about ten teachers. And the mix of those three types is a riot. The meetings are genuinely entertaining. We're each like a cartoon figure of these types. I'll come into a discussion thinking, "This is going to be fine. It's going to work out. No problem." And then the aversive type responds, "What do you mean no problem? This, this, this, and this is going to go wrong." And the deluded type asks, "What?" Seen in that light, it's all held much lighter.

A question came about how important it is to meditate with other people—whether you can practice alone all the time, or if joining a sangha and practicing in a group is essential.

I would say it depends a little bit on where one is on the path. For people beginning, group support would probably be quite helpful for most. As you know, practice is challenging. If one is just starting and not quite sure or stabilized in the path, the group support can be hugely beneficial.

But after that, once one is established in the practice to some extent, then I think it's really about whatever motivates you to practice. If you're more motivated by sitting alone in that quiet, that's great. If being in a group motivates you more and gets you to actually sit, then that's better. The important thing is what gets us to sit.

Another question arose about understanding the notion of dispassion—why it's not at odds with compassion or metta. And also, while it makes sense to reduce one's suffering to whatever extent possible, what about the cost of losing things that are enjoyable?

I think so much of these questions have to do with linguistic confusions. The words "passion" and "dispassion" in English carry many different connotations. It would be easy to interpret dispassion, or to feel into it, as being disinterested, just not engaged. But that's not what's meant by dispassion in this Buddhist sense.

An example I've given in some of the groups comes from a sutta where the Buddha uses a particular image. He talks about sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind-heart experience as the terrible bait of the world.

Mara is the embodiment of delusion or ignorance, a figure who appears often in Buddhist texts. Sometimes I think of Mara as the fisherman with his fishing pole and a hook, and we are the fish. All these experiences of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch come along, and we the fish bite. We get hooked.

Dispassion would mean not getting hooked. Now we have to leave the metaphor of the fish, but not getting hooked doesn't mean not being responsive. It means not being hooked in identifying with what's going on. Instead of "I'm thinking, I'm wanting, I'm

whatever"—adding the I or the self to the experience, which is our usual way of being in the world—dispassion means not being identified with all of these passing phenomena, but still being engaged and responsive in an appropriate way to what's arising.

In the face of suffering, compassion is almost the natural response if people have somewhat of an open heart. I remember one time I was doing a retreat where there was a lot of teaching about bodhichitta. Bodhichitta, particularly in the Tibetan tradition though it's embedded in other traditions as well, is that aspiration to get enlightened or awakened for the benefit of all. It becomes our motivation to practice.

For me, this has been a very interesting development in my own practice. For the first many years, I would be practicing with an aspiration to awaken. That was a strong aspiration. And I understood that the freer I was, it would inevitably be of help to others. If we're less judgmental and less angry and less greedy, of course it's going to be a positive influence on everyone we meet.

But when I started hearing the teachings of bodhichitta, instead of seeing the benefit of others as the inevitable byproduct of awakening, I put it at the beginning as the motivation to awaken. Do you see the difference? It will inevitably help beings, the clearer we get. But to actually make the benefit of beings the motive for practice—I felt that as a huge energizing influence, because in a way it took the practice out of a more narrow personal endeavor and put it in this vast context of all beings. We're practicing with that motivation or aspiration that we're doing this for the benefit of all. It was an infusion of energy into my practice.

So that's the kind of responsiveness I'm talking about. Dispassion is not about disengaging. It's just about not getting hooked in this self-identity, the identification with experience, which is a limitation, a contraction, the creation of the sense of self. I think it's important to see how the word dispassion is used in this context.

Someone asked about when wonder and gratitude arise for the practice and it's followed by a longing to share it with others—aside from noticing that and not clinging to it, how might we work with that skillfully over time?

I have plenty of thoughts about everything. You name it, I have a thought about it.

First, I'll suggest how not to share when you leave here and go home. "Hey, mom, you know, there's really no self." I wouldn't do that.

Fundamentally, the most essential sharing, and we can build on it, is how we are rather than what we say. If you go back to family and friends and work and you're more calm, less judgmental, less reactive—that's the most meaningful sharing because

people will feel it and see it. That's the main thing, and that's why just doing the practice inevitably helps people around us, because it transforms the way we are. So that should be the priority.

In terms of actual verbal sharing, I think it's really important to learn how to listen carefully, because we have to listen to where people are at. Over time, and this is its own practice, we can share what's appropriate to them in that moment. But if we have some preconception of what we want to share and we're speaking with somebody who's not in that space at all, it's not going to be very meaningful. So listening, a careful listening to the other person and feeling into them, is really important.

Those are the two main things. And then sharing from your own experience.

You might feel into where a person's at and share something like, "I had a similar experience and I worked with it in this way," or "this is what I understood." That becomes a meaningful communication.

---

So my question is about the term heart-mind, because I think it's the word mind that's confusing for me. I feel like the body has a mind, the heart has a mind, then there's the brain. Can you explain what you mean by that?

It's kind of interesting that in many Asian languages, the word for heart and mind is the same. In English, we've made that distinction, which is interesting in and of itself. The phrase heart-mind is trying to collapse them into one rather than keeping them separate. It really means every aspect of our awareness—from thoughts and intellectual activity and concepts to feelings and emotions to awareness itself. Heart-mind is inclusive of it all rather than bifurcating, mind up here, heart here.

In the practice, maybe you've had the sense it's not like that at all. There's just a kind of open space and different things are arising within—some are thoughts and some are feelings and some are emotions. It's all of that.

---

There were a couple of other questions that people had left, and in a way they're related. One was: how do you forgive someone who has hurt you many times? The other was: you mentioned asking the question "what is a thought?" but you said this was not a metaphysical question—but isn't it? Also, it's one thing to not be consumed by your thoughts, but how do you avoid being consumed by negative thoughts and expressions that someone says of you? How do you relate to that?

I thought these were really interesting, very practical questions, because we face these situations. When somebody has done us a lot of harm, how do we forgive them? And how do we relate if people are expressing a lot of negativity toward us?

When I read these questions, I reflected on situations I've been in like that, where certain people did things I felt were really harmful, both to me and to others, and were saying a lot of not such nice things. At one point I was on retreat, right in the midst of this whole story that had been going on for quite a while. It was very up in my mind. I would be going over and over the situation and the story, and I became a very good lawyer for arguing my case—going through what they had done, thinking, "Here are these five points where you're so wrong."

Right around that time, I was reading this quite amazing book, which maybe some of you have read. It's called *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle. He's a Jesuit priest working in L.A. with gang kids, living right in the middle of it—a huge amount of violence, a lot of killing, both stray and intentional. A violent, violent situation. And he's there, working with these kids and trying to find some way to bring them out of that milieu.

One line in the book really stuck with me. Or we could say the theme of the book: love no matter what. Love no matter what. This is not love meaning condoning those actions—he was right in the middle of it and seeing the violence of it. But even underneath all that, his vehicle for connecting with the kids was love no matter what. The book was really a kind of transmission of that theme, and it was really powerful.

It had a powerful impact on me.

So in the middle of this dukkha, this situation that I was in, I was going on and on justifying my own point of view—which of course was the right one, just so you're clear. But then I tried to bring in that theme, and it was really revelatory. There were some moments when I could actually let go of being the lawyer for my side and say, underneath all of that, love no matter what.

There was an interesting piece of this for me. Father Boyle is a Jesuit, so he was using a lot of God language, which is not my language. It's not the language I resonate to particularly. But there was something in the way he was talking about it—it actually served me at that particular time. As he was speaking, I could just imagine using the concept of God as he was using it. I got a very strong feeling of what it might be like: the love of God looking down on all of us beings, struggling in all the ways we're struggling, caught

up in everything we're caught up in—the fights and the struggles and the loves and everything. And then just... God loving everyone, independent of their particular activity. It gave me a window into that possibility. Love no matter what.

What was so striking was when I contrasted what it felt like when I was caught in being right to what it felt like when I was in the space of love no matter what. The first was a prison. It was a contracted space. And love no matter what was just open and spacious.

This illustrated to me that even when people are being hugely difficult and even harmful, we still respond in a way that seems most appropriate to the situation—we do respond. But the response is very different energetically, and in many ways, if we're coming from that space of love no matter what rather than "I'm right and you're wrong," it's a whole different experience.

I think there is a way to hold this, and it's not to say that even from that space the situation will be resolved, because sometimes it's not. Sometimes, for whatever reason, there's a stuckness involved that is not getting resolved, and it could even be ongoing. But still, even with all of that, I've seen the possibility of just resting and saying, okay, all of that stuff is happening, and I'll do what I need to do in response to it. But underneath all of that, not harbor any ill feeling. It's like, all of that's going on—it's not good, whatever—but love no matter what. For me, that was a really powerful learning.

Did that seem clear to you? It was really quite impactful.

So "Love No Matter What" is a beautiful aspiration.

Someone asked: How do you take that wider lens? What skillful means takes you out of that contracted space when you have less practice at it?

First, I want to add a postscript that I forgot: in certain situations that continue to be harmful in one way or another, sometimes the appropriate move is simply to remove oneself. I don't mean to suggest that love no matter what means we necessarily have to stay entangled in the conflict. Sometimes removing oneself is exactly the right thing to do. But can we remove ourselves maintaining the love no matter what, rather than out of anger? That's the key piece.

I'm not sure there's any one answer to your question. Clearly, practicing mettā or compassion as a practice in that specific situation might open the doorway to at least a glimpse of, okay, we're just all these suffering beings trying to do our best. Sometimes it's working and sometimes we're just spiraling down. But we see that bigger picture of suffering beings.

Why do people do harmful things? Do you think happy people go around and do really harmful things? I don't think so. Usually people are acting out in unskillful ways because of their own suffering, and they don't know how to deal with it. So it just spills out into these unskillful, unwholesome patterns. When we see the suffering underneath the action, I think that actually is the key.

It's interesting—in these situations, even one-on-one, if somebody is being really difficult in one way or another, whether we're staying on the level of difficulty or it could be the level of harm, it's very interesting, and I've done this, to actually look at them. Not look at our idea of them, but actually just to open our eyes and look.

And when I've done that, the suffering is so obvious. But most of the time, or often, we are reactive to the personality expression, because that's the most apparent. If somebody's acting out—it's kind of weird behavior, unskillful behavior—we just react to that and we don't look. We're not actually looking at the person. We're reacting to the behavior.

And when I've looked, as I said, the suffering is so apparent. And in seeing the suffering, it's much easier to drop to this level where we really feel compassion. Again, it doesn't mean not engaging. We take whatever response is appropriate and helpful, as best we can. But our hearts are really open to that person. It's a whole other way of relating to difficulties.

So let's just sit for a few minutes in the space of love, no matter what. And you might just extend this feeling—underneath everything, underneath all of our interactions, people we love, people we don't love, people we dislike—but underneath it all, can we hold ourselves and everybody else in that space?

It's really beautiful. It's a beautiful way of being in the world.

May all beings be at ease.

CHAPTER 50

# Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h04

> *In this engaging Q&A session from the three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein responds to practitioners' questions on fundamental Buddhist teachings with characteristic clarity and personal insight. He begins by clarifying a common misunderstanding about karma—that we must burn through all past kamma before awakening—explaining that liberation depends on developing the factors of enlightenment, not exhausting infinite past actions.*
>
> *Goldstein offers an illuminating exploration of anattā (not-self), using the Big Dipper analogy to demonstrate how we reify patterns into things, creating the illusion of an unchanging self. He emphasizes that the teaching of not-self doesn't negate the lawfulness of cause and effect (paṭicca samuppāda), but rather reveals that this unfolding process never required a self in the first place. The identification with consciousness as 'the knower' is identified as the last holdout of self-view.*
>
> *Perhaps most practically valuable is Goldstein's sharing of transformative insights from his own fifty years of practice. He introduces the profound realization that 'there's nothing to want'—since whatever arises will pass away—as a direct taste of the Third Noble Truth (nirodha). He offers practical mantras including 'already aware,' 'it's okay,' and 'it doesn't matter to what you don't cling.' The session includes deeply personal accounts of working with fear and physical pain, distinguishing between mere recognition and true mindfulness, and understanding doubt (vicikicchā) as bewilderment rather than wise discernment.*

Good to be with all of you this evening. I'd be glad to try to respond to any easy questions.

**Question:** I believe you told a story that in his last lifetime the Buddha had headaches because he had rejoiced at the flopping of a fish in a previous lifetime—a fish that was going to be his lunch. What that suggests is that for each transgression there's a specific penance we have to pay. But it seems hardly possible that we'd ever get out of karmic debt if that's true. What's your understanding of how we resolve our burden of past karma?

There's actually an important point in this question which I think is really worth addressing. Although I don't particularly remember telling that specific story, it does illustrate the point. There's often a misunderstanding that in order to realize enlightenment or awakening, we have to burn through all our past karma in some way. But as you sug-

gested in the question, that would be impossible, because if one believes in the Buddhist cosmology of many lives and past lives, we're all trailing an infinite amount of past karma. There would be no way to have all of those past actions bear fruit before awakening.

So I think that's just a mistaken view. It really has to do with developing the mind—the balance of mind and the factors of awakening, which I'm sure you've heard about during the retreat—to a place of maturity and balance where the mind opens. It's said that some specific actions will prevent that awakening in this lifetime. They're called the five heinous deeds, and I don't think any of you have hopefully committed them: killing one's mother or father, wounding the Buddha, killing an Arahant, causing a schism in the Sangha. Short of that, even though all of us have a mix of wholesome and unwholesome karma from the past, none of it will be a barrier to awakening. So I would just say that's good news.

I've heard this misunderstanding from many people over the years, and it doesn't really make sense.

**Question:** Everything that arises is not-self. This includes the body and the brain and its qualities and characteristics—memory, emotions, motives, intentions, and so on. If everything that arises is not-self, there can neither be a situation in which there's choice or no choice, a situation in which there's responsibility or no responsibility. And also in such a situation there can't possibly be any karma, because it's a situation of not-self, and not-self can't have karma. So in that kind of situation, where there's not-self to be reborn and there's not karma to be reborn, what can possibly be reborn? And if it is reborn, it's not-self anyway.

There was a lot in that question. I'll try to address at least some of it.

First is the understanding that in the teachings of not-self, it's not that we start with a self and then somehow through our practice we get rid of it. It's really to realize that it was never there in the first place.

The law of cause and effect—of actions bringing about results—does not depend on the concept of self. It simply is saying that certain actions are going to bring about certain results depending on the motivation of that action. I'm sure you've heard this over these weeks: actions motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion will bring about unwholesome results. Likewise, wholesome motivation will bring about wholesome results. There's no self involved in any of that. It's simply action and result, action and result. It's this process of each moment's experience conditioning the next, conditioning the next, conditioning the next.

The way it's described in the Buddhist teachings, death consciousness—the quality of the mind at death—depending on the particular qualities present in the mind at the moment of death consciousness, that will condition the rebirth consciousness, the quality of the ongoing process.

To talk about selflessness does not mean that the process is unlawful or chaotic or that somehow everything just falls apart. The unfolding of our lives and the unfolding of the world are following certain laws of nature, whether they're the scientific laws of chemistry or physics, or the psychological laws—the laws of the mind—which the Buddha so brilliantly illuminated for us to see for ourselves. So it's not a question of belief. The Buddha gave teachings and pointed a way for us to understand this process of cause and effect, moment to moment, and to verify that in our own experience.

Just to underscore this: in all of these teachings there's never a requirement for belief.

It's not what this is about. It's all about suggestions for your own investigation, your own understanding.

Very often, conventionally, and for most of our lives until we've really examined this process very deeply, there is the felt sense that the process is happening to someone. This is where I think the illusion arises—the critical importance of the notion of self. Even when we see the impermanence of all the things mentioned—the bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, and emotions—even when we have some sense of their impermanence, of their arising and passing due to different causes and conditions, even when we recognize it as an impersonal process and perhaps get a glimpse of that in our practice, even more than a glimpse... it's all just a passing show. Still, for the most part and for quite a while, there's a tendency to be identified with the one who's knowing it all.

So I'm the one who's seeing the impermanence of all this. I'm even seeing the selfless nature of all those phenomena—but not yet seeing the selfless nature of the knowing itself. I find that this identification with consciousness, identification with knowing, is the last holdout of self. It's where that final vestige of a sense of self resides: in the identification with the knowing, which creates the felt sense of a knower, an observer, a witness.

None of the processes of our unfolding life, and none of the processes involved in the continuity from life to life, are in any way dependent on the notion of some unchanging, abiding something-or-other that is carried through all the changes. It's not that the

changes are happening to someone. Rather, if you want to use the word *self*—which we do conventionally, and it's totally fine to use it in a conventional way, there's no problem—the key is to really see what you're referring to when you use that term.

If you're referring to some sense of an unchanging, abiding, soul-like entity, this is what the Buddha said is not seen clearly. But if you're using the term *self* to describe the unfolding, changing process of life and the continuity of it, the lawfulness of that unfolding, then it's fine to use the word that way.

I can't resist—I'm sure many of you know what's coming. An example I've been using for the last fifty years: the Big Dipper. You're familiar with the constellation in the sky? You go out at night, it's clear, you can see the stars. It's a pretty easy constellation to recognize.

So you're coming close to the end of the first six weeks. Consider this your final exam. Everything depends on your answer to this question: Is there really a Big Dipper up in the sky?

There's no Big Dipper. Big Dipper is a concept, obviously, which we've created. There's a certain perception of stars in a certain pattern. We perceive the pattern, we put a name on the pattern, we call it Big Dipper.

Self is like Big Dipper.

All of the phenomena—just like those stars creating a pattern as we look at the sky—all the phenomena of our life create a pattern. When I get up in the morning and look in the mirror, yeah, that's me. The pattern is there. But what happens in this situation, and in many others, is that we reify patterns. We make a pattern into a thing. And that's what we do; that's how the notion of self is created.

There is a pattern, a recognizable one, and this pattern is different from that pattern—each one is different. But it's a pattern of changing elements. It's not a pattern with any unchanging thing at the heart of it. We reify the pattern into a thing and then we live in that world. And that's the source of a lot of our problems.

If you think it's an easy thing to let go of, to see through patterns, try this as an experiment: on a clear night, if you're familiar with the constellation, go out and see if it's possible not to see the Big Dipper. It's really hard to just see stars in the sky without collapsing them into separate patterns, because that's our own overlay. The pattern as a thing is not in the sky—we're perceiving it that way.

So if it's that difficult not to see the Big Dipper, it's no wonder you have to spend three months here in order to not see self. Or maybe many three months. But this is where it's going: seeing through our attachment to the pattern of self.

I hope this covers at least some of what you were asking about.

Any women who would like to ask some questions?

"In the beginning of our retreat, the teachers emphasized that this is a marathon, not a sprint. I am here for three months, as many of us are, and I was curious about any suggestions you have about refining our practice for the rest of our time here—not coming from a place of striving or panicking that we're halfway done, but just out of honoring."

I have suggestions for almost everything. Whether they're valuable or not is another question. But in this regard, I do have a very specific one, something I've been working on myself in recent years that has really changed my practice and my understanding of the practice in a pretty significant way. It was interesting to me that it unfolded after all these years—I've been practicing for fifty years. But this is the beauty of the Dharma: it's endlessly rich. It's so vast. So it's definitely not a question of a three-month retreat. It's a lifetime, perhaps many lifetimes of practice, a continual exploration and investigation of the nature of this body-mind and how it all works.

This has been born out of my own practice over all these years, just sitting, sitting, and every once in a while in a retreat, you see something in a slightly different way. That's a long preface to this.

There is a line in the suttas which recurs quite frequently, and it's often the line which either prompts a person's awakening or is spoken as an expression of somebody's awakening. So I'm going to give you the line. This is a big chance. Just before I do —don't be beguiled by its simplicity, because, as I said, people get enlightened listening to this.

*Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.*

Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. It's not saying some things that arise will pass away. *Whatever* has the nature to arise will also pass away. So what has the nature to arise? Absolutely everything in our experience.

I was doing a self-retreat, sitting and just watching the unfolding process. For some reason this line came to my mind. But because it came to mind right in the midst of intensive practice, it wasn't so much an intellectual remembering. It's as if that teaching—

*whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away*—became part of the process. It took on much more meaning than just reading it as a philosophic statement of impermanence.

So I'm sitting, just in this unfolding process: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And I saw in that moment, with regard to Dharma practice on the most fundamental level, there's nothing to want. Because whatever it is that we're wanting will also pass away. That became a little mantra for me: *there's nothing to want.* And in that moment, I could feel the mind drop back from a subtle level of wanting or leaning into the process that I didn't even know was there.

I thought I was just in the unfolding of the breath, the sensations, sounds, whatever was occurring. But I'm sure you've had the experience of meditating where we're in this moment *in order for* the next moment. We're with the breath in order to get a little more concentrated. We're with the sensation in order for it to dissolve. There's very often an "in order to" mind, in a very subtle way, just in the moment. It's as if there's a slight leaning into the process.

So this line—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, there's nothing to want—meditatively, I could feel the mind dropping back. And that not wanting is exactly a glimpse of the Third Noble Truth.

In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha talked about suffering, about what is the cause of suffering on the most fundamental level. Of course, there are lots of causes for suffering in society and in our lives. But on the most fundamental level of this mind-body process, what keeps us locked in, even imprisoned by it, is craving.

We're wanting something, and that's what keeps us locked into this cycle of becoming—wanting to become this, wanting to become that. Even dharmically, meditatively, this craving creeps in.

So that realization, even if it's just for a few moments... it's not that we may realize something in paying attention to this and it's necessarily going to be full enlightenment. It may just be a moment's enlightenment, where we say, "Here, there's nothing to want." Nothing to want is the end of craving, which is precisely the Third Noble Truth.

And in that moment—and I'd suggest you play with it, without going crazy, just having fun playing with it out of interest and investigation and inquiry—maybe you will have that experience, even for a moment or two: nothing to want. And to be sitting or walking at any time, if you actually feel that moment of dropping back from that lean-

ing into, just pay attention or take an interest in the quality of the mind that doesn't want. You will have an experience—again, it may be momentary, but genuine—of a genuine peace.

The Buddha, in his enlightenment song after his awakening, in that famous quote: "Oh house builder, you have now been seen. You will build no house again, house of self." The end of that whole verse is: "Realized is the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving." The Buddha couldn't point more directly to the nature of the free mind.

But for years, I had put the end of craving far away. I had seen that and understood the Third Noble Truth as something I might reach in thirty years, in fifty lifetimes—maybe then I'll come to the end of craving. I saw it as a far-off goal. It was in this situation that I realized: yes, it's that also, but actually we can touch it and taste it right now. So that's what I would suggest. I think that would reframe your practice.

This is not to say that particular practices we do to develop concentration and to develop metta, where there is an aspiration for some kind of completion—those practices are absolutely essential. They're essential in developing wholesome states of mind, but also essential in creating the foundation or the momentum of practice where things are just rolling on by themselves, which actually allows the mind to realize, to taste that there's nothing to want.

If our mind is still struggling with being scattered and lost in thought, it may be harder to actually have the taste of that. So even if we're holding this as the foundation of our practice, we can still be doing—and need to do—all the other practices. But it's very different if we have that in mind. Then we even do those practices without that agitation.

Just as an example of what not to do: one time in Burma, I was doing intensive metta practice. I'm going to share with you two completely nutty things I was doing. I bet none of you have done anything quite as nutty.

Somehow I got it into my head that the faster I said the phrases, the deeper my practice would go. Pretty crazy. I spent—it wasn't too long, but long enough—doing just that. Obviously it was the wrong way to be practicing metta.

Another thing I did, which took a while to see and let go of, was that I kept checking. So I'm doing the phrases, and I got past the speed phrases. I'm a little more relaxed, just saying them and trying to feel. But then I got into the habit of asking, "How am I doing? Is the metta developing? Oh, the metta is stronger. The metta is weaker." It became all about me, not about the metta I was trying to extend. When we're checking our practice instead of just doing it, that can become a big hindrance.

So there's nothing to want. Realizing that, we can do all of the various practices in skillful ways. One last little mantra that has helped me a lot in my practice when I felt like the striving was too strong, where I could feel the pushing—it was just a really simple reminder: "Already aware." Already aware. Or "already here." That awareness is not something I had to get. I just had to come back to being present. Each time I felt myself struggling, I would remind myself, "Oh, already aware," and I could settle back into that ease. Some combination of all this might be helpful.

ability to function, to walk and all of that. But it's my perception around it, and it comes with a lot of aversion and delusions. So how do you change? Because it's nothing but just changing your perception around it—the condition begins to change and fade or become non-existent, because it doesn't exist anyway. But how do I do that without aversion and delusion?"

That's a striking example of something that is happening, perhaps in less intense ways, all the time with different kinds of conditions. But it's a good example because it points to something striking and impactful.

It really has to do—and again, I'm sure you've heard quite a lot about this—with our relationship to the feeling tone of experience. The reactivity of either attachment or aversion lies in our habituated response to pleasant and unpleasant. This goes very deep. It's not by accident that the Buddha gave so much emphasis to becoming mindful of these feeling tones, because it just seems the most normal thing in the world to want what's pleasant and to avoid what's unpleasant. If we went up to anybody on the street and asked, "Do you want what's pleasant?" they'd say, "Yeah." "Do you want to avoid what's unpleasant?" "Yeah." It just seems like total common sense.

But this is where the Buddha's awakening to how the process unfolds, and what entangles us in the process, was so brilliant and liberating. He saw that it's precisely this habituated conditioning to pleasant and unpleasant that keeps us in reactivity to experience. It keeps us living very defensively against any unpleasantness, and aggressively in terms of trying to get more pleasant things in our lives.

Being here on retreat, in the whole of this practice—and it is a practice over a lifetime—when you're experiencing physical sensations that are unpleasant, there can well be a tendency to feel the sensation and feel the pain or the unpleasantness of it, and then, unless the mindfulness is right there, there may be reactivity to the unpleasant. "I don't like this." We're trying to push it away or get rid of it in some way, or we contract, and sometimes fear arises. All of that is habituated response to unpleasantness. And then the mind very easily starts creating all kinds of stories about the unpleasantness, about the reactivity, about the disease, about somebody having a disease.

We create a big story of our lives, which at this point is quite distant from the momentary experience of sensation and unpleasantness. The mind has moved far from that bare experience, that bare attention.

So our practice is coming back to that moment, freeing ourselves from the reactivity and from the story. It takes a lot of practice, and it also takes a lot of interest in watching the particular process of your own mind.

I'll give you an example. This goes back quite a few years now, maybe fifteen or twenty years. I was on a self-retreat, a long one, for a few months. And something happened—I did something that really damaged my body in a significant way. It was quite bad. And it was something I had done voluntarily, just trying to make myself feel better. I did something that actually made it incredibly worse.

For almost a month, my mind was lost in anguish because the physical situation was really bad. It was very painful, and I didn't see any way out. So my mind went through that whole sequence I just mentioned—just lost in the story. The words that kept coming up were so seductive: "How could I have been so stupid?" There was that self-judgment. Here I was going along fine, and then I thought, "Oh, how can I make things better?"—the old greedy mind—and it made things infinitely worse.

"How could I have been so stupid?" If I didn't catch that thought, it was so seductive, so believable, that I would spend the next half hour or hour in anguish, with all the thoughts associated with what I had done and my judgment about it. It took a couple of weeks of being carried away again and again in that cycle.

But at a certain point I said, "Joseph, what is going on here? How am I getting so caught?" And then I saw: I was getting caught because I wasn't picking up that first thought—"How could I have been so stupid?" Because that thought was so believable, so seductive, if I was not mindful of it as a thought, I was on that train.

So I just got really good at it. I set out the radar. I could not give that thought any airtime, because if I did, I was gone. But it was amazing—once I figured out what I needed to do to not hop on the train, the whole thing turned around. The physical consequences stayed for quite a while, but my mind became so much more at ease because I could bring it right back to the momentary sensation, catching the thought, noticing the unpleasantness, catching that first thought and not getting lost in it.

So I think that's part of the discovery process, rooted in developing and deepening the capacity of equanimity. This is really what equanimity means: where pleasant and unpleasant become equal, where the mind is just not reactive. Pleasant—we experience it as pleasant and see that, yes, this is pleasant, and it's changing.

When painful things come, we experience them as unpleasant without reactivity. "Oh, this is unpleasant." That's the equanimous mind. Equanimity is like space—it just holds everything. Space is impartial. So equanimity really means impartiality.

We can develop that, and with certain things it's challenging. Like in the example I gave, it took me quite a while to come to that place of equanimity where I wasn't caught up. But it's definitely workable to come to a place of freedom.

So just one last little mantra: if freedom is dependent on conditions, it's not freedom. If you have the idea that your experience has to be a certain way to be free, you're missing the boat. Because then it's not freedom. Freedom is in the mind that's not wanting, that's not craving, that's non-reactive to the changing flow of phenomena.

This is really the last little mantra, and it's one of my favorites. The Buddha talked about liberation through non-clinging. That's the essence of the practice. That's what you're practicing. It's not practicing *for* something—it's practicing the mind that doesn't cling, that doesn't crave. So the mantra is: it doesn't matter to what you don't cling. Which means you don't have to wait for something not to cling to. Why not not cling now? To whatever it is that's arising.

But as we all know, we come to the edges of our comfort zone and we're okay with this, and we can not cling to this much, but then we reach a certain edge and we get all reactive in one way or another. So that's the course of practice. We're at an edge. Okay, can I not cling here? We each reach our edges of the comfort zone and then relax, and so our capacity gets a little bigger. We reach other edges, we relax, capacity gets bigger.

My imagination of the Buddha's mind—and it clearly is my imagination of it—but it's a mind without edges. And a mind without edges is a mind without fear. It's just openness. Whatever's arising and passing, pleasant or unpleasant, the mind is residing in that spaciousness.

*Could you provide some tips and techniques for working with the mind state of fear?*

Oh, plenty, because I worked with that a lot. Of the various afflictive emotions, my big alternation was between desire and fear, so I worked a lot with it. It's very related to the last question because the great difficulty with being with fear is that it's very unpleasant. And so it triggers the same conditioned response as all other unpleasant things. It's the emotional analog. Fear is analogous to a pain in the knee, which is physical pain—fear is emotional pain.

I was working with this a lot, and there was a point in my practice where the fear was just so strong. It was primal. It was completely irrational. I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It didn't make any sense. It was just the primal energy. For whatever reason, in my particular conditioning, that's what was coming up.

And I was noting it and noting it and noting it for years. This was a deeply, deeply rooted pattern.

There were a few key moments in the process of working with it. One was when I was teaching with my colleague Sharon Salzberg. We were teaching in Texas, and it was at a time when I was in the midst of all this. We were taking a walk after lunch, and I was going on and on about my fear—there's so much fear, and I'm such a fearful person, and it's going to take thirty years of therapy to unwind it all. And she turned to me, looked at me, and said, "Joseph, it's only a mind state."

It's something I must have said to other people a million times. It's just a mind state. But I was making this whole big story. I was building the superstructure of self on top of a passing emotion. The fear was not always there—it was there sometimes—but because I was so reactive to it, so didn't like it, so didn't want it to be there, I built up this whole story, which of course just solidified it. So that's one thing to pay attention to when fear comes up: to try to really see it. Yes, this is a passing mind state, and whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

The second major turning point with the fear came when I was on retreat, doing walking meditation right outside. I was walking and walking and noting. And then something shifted. This was after years of the fear coming up at different times, sometimes very strongly. Something shifted in my mind, and the shift was expressed in the thought: if this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay.

In all those years, that was the first moment I really accepted it. All that time when I thought I was being mindful, I was noticing it, I knew it was there—but it was not true mindfulness because I was noting it so it would go away. I didn't realize this because there's a very common mistaken conflation of two different mind states: the mind quality of recognition and mindfulness.

We very often think that if we recognize something, it means we're being mindful of it. So I recognized the fear. I knew what it was. And because I recognized it and was noting it, I thought I was being mindful. But recognition and mindfulness are two very different things. We can be recognizing things through the filter of wanting, through the

filter of aversion, through the filter of delusion, where experience is just not being seen clearly. That moment outside was the first moment I was really mindful, which included that aspect of acceptance. It's okay. If it's here for the rest of my life, it's okay.

"It's okay" became a little mantra that I use a lot in practice, whenever I'm struggling.

This is another principle worth remembering. Whenever you're struggling—let's say in your practice for now, but it could also apply in life, and does—struggle means just one thing: something is happening that you're not accepting. Because if you were accepting it, you wouldn't be struggling.

So struggle goes from being a problem to becoming feedback. It's almost like a mindfulness bell. If you're struggling in your practice and you realize, "Oh, this means something is happening that I'm not accepting," then that can trigger a real inquiry. Look: okay, well, what is it? Maybe it's some pain in the body. Maybe it's low-level discomfort that the mind is reacting to with "I don't really like this." You're trying to be with the breath, but you're struggling with it. Or it could be restlessness—you're feeling very restless. The restlessness is one thing.

The struggling with restlessness is another matter entirely. So the question becomes: can I just open to feeling restless? That's what's arising. Or maybe there's a lot of thoughts going through the mind. Here you're trying to be with the breath or be with sensations in the body, but thoughts keep carrying you away, and then you get into this sense of struggle. Struggle is simply saying something is going on that you're not accepting—in this case, a lot of thoughts. How about just sitting back and noting, "Lots of thinking"? That becomes your note. And you're just allowing for that to happen instead of struggling with it.

So that goes back to the fear we discussed. Can we just be with it as an unpleasant emotion, which involves bodily sensations and thoughts and feeling tone in the mind? It's okay. It's okay. Here for the rest of my life, it's okay. And you know what happens when you have that attitude of "it's okay"? It becomes okay. Even if it's just for a few moments.

It's through this exploration—that's why I say this whole practice is about your own investigation of how the mind creates suffering, how our minds work. We all have our own patterns for it. But that's what's so endlessly interesting about all this. You're getting in there, and you're developing the tools that allow you to get in there. There's enough stability, enough mindfulness and stillness and acceptance. Oh yes, it's this intricate web—each one of us with our own personal conditioning. It's pretty interesting. And it's all going to a place of greater ease.

*Question:* I have a tendency to have very seductive daydreams that I love to just live in. And I know that I should be mindful, but I don't want to.

*Joseph:* I have the perfect remedy. This is something I never really practiced myself, because that wasn't so much the hindrance that my mind went to. But I read about it in the teachings of Mahasi Sayadaw, who's kind of the grandfather of a lot of our teachers. He once described, as part of the practice—and it really surprised me when I read this because it felt a little out of the box in terms of meditation—but he said you can use the noting to note what's happening in the fantasy. So you're not trying to give up the fantasy. You're having the fantasy, but you're noting: "imagining," "meeting," "talking." I'll leave it there.

But it would be really interesting for you to watch carefully the difference in your experience between those moments when you're really lost in it—just in it and carried away by it—and those moments when you're still aware of the fantasy as it's playing out, but the mind is actually noting. Because then you are being mindful of that experience. I think you would see the huge difference, even within the fantasy, of whether you're lost in it or mindful of it. So that way you don't have to get into a conflict of thinking, "It shouldn't be here" or "How can I get rid of it?" You're actually using that as the vehicle for mindfulness. Good luck.

*Question:* Could you talk a little bit about doubt? Because I feel I have a lot of it, but in some senses it has served me. I think it makes me not buy so much into rituals and big ideas, and test everything for myself, which I find is wholesome and beneficial. But in other senses, I feel it kind of separates me, and maybe I don't test my boundaries or get out of my comfort zone sometimes—not trying things that feel wrong.

*Joseph:* First, you know, one of the interesting problems in the transmission of the Dharma in the West is that the teachings were preserved in the Pali language from early Buddhism. As it's translated into many languages—but now into English—one of the problems is that English words we use for certain Pali terms can have a variety of meanings.

Doubt is one example. Desire is another. Desire can mean greed or clinging—that aspect of the mind. It can also mean aspiration. So there can be a really wholesome aspiration for awakening, for compassion, for love, and we could use the same word "desire." Doubt is the same way.

So one kind of doubt which you described is really the doubt of—you could say it's the opposite of dogmatic belief. You don't just believe anything. You're really checking it out and inquiring for yourself and seeing for yourself whether something is true or not. And the Buddha suggested that. That's actually a very skillful mind state. So that aspect of doubt, I think, is worth cultivating.

The doubt that's a hindrance is the doubt of bewilderment. It's not the doubt of discernment. The example given is you're at a crossroads and you just don't know which way to go—should I go this way, should I go that way—and the mind just goes back and forth and back and forth and doesn't go anyplace. The doubt has stopped all forward movement. So that's the doubt that has to be seen through and seen as a hindrance and not identified with.

Years ago, there was a yogi on a three-month retreat who spent the whole three months going back and forth between whether he should be doing metta or vipassana. Every single interview. He'd come in and say, if he were doing vipassana, "Oh, I really want to do metta." I said, "Great, do it." Next interview, "Oh, I think I should be doing vipassana." It was a classic example of doubt—that quality where the mind just doesn't land and is caught up in bewilderment.

The problem is the great seduction of doubt. The Buddha talked about this as being, of all the hindrances, the most dangerous, and for an interesting reason. With all the other hindrances—desire or aversion or restlessness or sleepiness—the mind can still be in the vicinity of the object. It may be looking through different filters and may not be clearly focused, but at least it's in the ballpark. With doubt, we're not even in the ballpark. The mind has completely removed itself from what's actually happening in the moment and is just caught in this seesaw of bewilderment. That's why it's really worth learning about doubt so we can recognize it when it comes.

The seduction of doubt is that it comes masquerading as wisdom. It's very tricky because there's this wise-sounding voice in the mind: "Oh yeah, maybe I should really open my heart. Metta would be good. No, but this doesn't really lead to deepening insight. Maybe I should do vipassana." And each one sounds reasonable. It's this wise-sounding voice that seduces us. So you have to catch on to the trick of doubt and see how it comes disguised as wisdom.

When you can see through that, see through its disguise and recognize doubt, you see it's just a thought. That's all it is. And if you see it as an empty passing thought in the mind, it's not a problem. The fact that it arises is not a problem. It's getting seduced and caught up in it that's the problem.

Just like in the example I used with the anguish and catching that first seductive thought in its first few words, I would pay attention very carefully and specifically to the particular form that doubt takes in your mind. See it clearly enough so you could write down the sentence, whatever it is. Because once you see clearly, most likely there will not be too many varieties. There'll be maybe a few seductive sentences. But once you see what they are, you just keep the radar out. And as soon as it comes—oh, that's doubt. So it's very workable. And it's important to work with it, because that hindrance can really take one out of the practice.

Okay, gang. I could go on for a long time. One time with my first teacher Munindraji, he was visiting the States and we were out in California in someone's home and people had come to hear his teachings. He started at two in the afternoon and people were asking questions.

He went until 10 at night. I was there thinking, come on, let's just go. As long as people were left, he would continue—people were just fading out until the last person had left, and he was still there.

So I vowed never to do that.

Let's sit for just a couple of minutes and let everything dissolve.

*Thank you.*

CHAPTER 51

# Q&A with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · 1h12

> *In this engaging Q&A session from the three-month retreat at Insight Meditation Society, founding teacher Joseph Goldstein responds to practitioners' questions with characteristic warmth and depth. He begins with transformative insights on walking meditation, emphasizing the shift from "watching" to "feeling" the movement, and how noting elements (air, earth) rather than body parts can reveal the direct experience of anattā (non-self).*
>
> *Goldstein addresses the comparing mind through the lens of māna (conceit), one of the last defilements to be uprooted even after desire and aversion fall away. He shares personal stories illustrating how simply recognizing "māna" without judgment allows the pattern to dissolve naturally. The discussion expands to include the crucial distinction between aspiration and expectation, and why we must not "waste our suffering" but instead investigate it as direct practice of the Four Noble Truths.*
>
> *The talk culminates in Goldstein's reflection on fifty years of practice across traditions, arriving at the unifying principle: metaphysics as skillful means for non-clinging. He outlines the Buddha's four categories of attachment—sense pleasures, views and opinions, rites and rituals, and the view of self—offering the mantras "don't cling" and "I am not exempt" as guides to full liberation.*

Good evening, everyone.

So tonight, it's my privilege and honor to introduce Joseph Goldstein, who is, in case you don't know, one of the founders of this place, a teacher of all of us here on the teaching team, and a great guy. The format for this evening: there were so many questions, a lot of great questions—probably forty or fifty of them—so we clearly aren't going to get to them all. I will be reading the questions for Joseph, and in a couple of instances I've combined two or three.

I think we'll launch right in. So the first question I have chosen is, dear to my heart: how about some tips on walking meditation?

---

First, just to say it feels delightful to be here with you all. I haven't been teaching the three-month course for a number of years now, so it's always great to kind of drop in, at least for an evening like this.

In terms of the question about walking, I think the first thing I want to say is that very often people have created an internal hierarchy about the importance of various aspects of the practice. For many people, sitting is at the top, walking is next, and everything else is a distant third. Just as an experiment, maybe for half a day or a day, it might be interesting to reverse the order and give primary importance to all the other activities in the day—giving the same attention to those as you do to sitting, and then walking, and then sitting. This doesn't mean you shouldn't come to the sitting. But for me, the walking practice has been equally insightful, and some of the most interesting insights have happened in the walking. So this is all by way of giving it a plug.

One of the reasons walking is so helpful is that in many ways, it carries over the most into your life in the world, because we're moving around a lot. My experience has been that having done thousands of hours, countless hours of walking practice over these many years, mindfulness of taking a step almost becomes the default. Just from having done it so much, out in the busyness of the world—I just came back from a few days in New York—walking down the street, if we've established the habit of being mindful in walking, it's right there in the midst of our daily life. So walking plays a really important role.

Now, some tips. One of the biggest ones—and maybe some of the other teachers have expressed this already—for me there was a huge shift in the walking which had to do with how I was languaging it to myself. Often in the language we use for meditation instructions there's a lot of watching language: watch, notice, observe. This watching language, just in the way it suggests, makes it as if we're up here somehow looking at something. That makes the walking a lot more difficult.

At a certain point in my practice—and it took years to somehow intuit this—I just changed to feeling language: to feel the movement rather than watching the movement or observing the movement. The feeling is from the inside. It's like dance or tai chi or yoga. We're much more embodied inside than if we're walking with the sense of observing it, because that's from the outside. Does this seem clear? As I said, maybe you've already heard this, but for me that was a really transformative moment.

As you're walking, and it doesn't take much—you don't have to have deep samādhi to make this switch—it's just remembering, as you're walking, to simply feel it. Let's do an experiment. If you would just move your arm and feel the movement. You might move it at different speeds and just feel it. Does it take any effort at all? It's so effortless and easeful and present, because feeling is from the inside. It's like we're already embodied. This just makes the practice a lot more enjoyable.

Another aspect, and this is more subtle: very often as we're walking, even as we are feeling the sensations of the movement and the touch, there's a subtle overlay of something in between an image and an idea of foot and leg. We're feeling, we're being mindful and feeling the movement, but very often there's just that overlay of moving the foot or moving the leg. We don't actually feel "foot" or "leg" because there's no sensation called foot. There's no sensation called leg. That's a concept we're overlaying on top of the actual sensations being felt.

The reason this is important—and it points to an even larger understanding—is the importance in our meditation of dropping from the level of concept to direct experience. The concept of foot, leg, body doesn't change. When the mind is attuned more to the concept than to the actual felt experience, we're not gaining insight into the momentary changing nature of things. Even as we're being mindful in the walking and connected somewhat to the actual sensations—movement, pressure, heaviness, lightness, whatever it may be—I found it really interesting just to keep an eye out for that overlay.

One very dramatic shift came in my walking from doing this—

At different times, I would start noting the elements rather than using "lift, move, place" or whatever noting technique you might employ. For example, I would simply note "air element" during the movement, and "earth element" as I touched down. Just "air, earth, air, earth."

I was struck by a very dramatic shift in understanding. When I was simply noticing movement and touch, there remained that slight overlay of "foot" or "leg"—all of this operating on an extremely subtle level. This almost automatically leads to a sense of "my foot" and "my leg." Right there is the beginning of the creation, the strengthening, of the sense of self, of "I."

But it's very unlikely, if you're noticing air element or earth element, that this would transform into "my air element" or "my earth element." That's simply not what the mind does. This was born directly out of my experience of practicing in this way. The mind dropped into a very vivid experience of selflessness.

As I'm sure has been discussed extensively over the past six weeks, for many people this teaching on non-self is the most counterintuitive. We live as a self—that's how we operate in the world. So this whole teaching on anatta really takes a lot of settling into and exploring. Yet in the walking, I found it became an immediate experience. That's all

there is: just air, earth, air, earth. I would encourage you, if you're interested, to experiment with this. These were truly transformative aspects of my walking practice and led to a real depth of understanding.

I suppose the third helpful hint is simply: just do it. Don't shortchange the walking, because it offers tremendous benefits both in formal practice and in carrying over into our daily lives.

*Question: Any suggestions for how to work with the comparing mind?*

One of the things I love about these question-and-response sessions is that almost every question addresses something we've all experienced. It reveals our commonality. The particular storyline may differ, but the basic patterns in our minds are all the same. To me, that's one of the joys of practice—the more we understand ourselves and our own minds, the more we understand everybody else, because our minds really work in the same way.

Is there anybody here who has not experienced the comparing mind?

A couple of things to consider. First, recognize that comparing is a manifestation of what Buddhism calls mana—one of the defilements or unwholesome mental factors, generally translated as "conceit." But in English, "conceit" doesn't really capture what mana is, because this comparing can take many forms: we can feel ourselves better than, equal to, or less than others.

I've found it really helpful, when certain psychological or emotional patterns arise again and again—patterns that are deeply conditioned—to actually recognize the particular defilement or mental factor from which those thoughts emerge. So when the comparing mind appears and I see it, I like to use the Pali word: just "mana."

If we use an English word, labeling it as "comparing," it's quite likely that even in the naming and recognizing of it, there's a slight judgment—this is not good, this is bad. When I use the Pali word, it keeps the experience very impersonal. It's just this factor of mind doing its thing. There's much less sense of imbuing that pattern with selfhood, with "I." It's just mana. Just mana doing its mana-ing.

Let me share a story with you, because recognizing it in this way makes it remarkably simple to disengage. Last year, or perhaps the year before, I was doing a self-retreat at my house.

I don't know if you know of Bhikkhu Anālayo. He has a kuti down at the study center, and he was doing a self-retreat at the same time I was. For those of you who know him, he's really disciplined—a hardcore yogi, a great renunciate. I mean, he's full on.

So I was sitting in my house, knowing he was down there on retreat. And one afternoon, I was just frittering away some time. I didn't even know what I was doing, but it was just wasting time. And then I had the thought, "I'll bet Anālayo's not doing this."

Then I started to get down on myself. "Oh yeah, he's such a good yogi, and I'm just..." But fortunately—and I think this is the fruit of many years of practice—it didn't take too long until I recognized, "Oh, that's just māna. That's just māna." And as soon as I recognized it for what it was, in this totally non-judgmental way, just seeing it's this factor doing this thing—"Oh, māna"—the whole thing fell away. And the whole emotional residue, the feeling bad, fell away.

So that kind of precise recognition of the particular defilements that are causing whatever the pattern is—you know, it's hugely helpful. And it's quick. The liberation from it is not a long process. We don't have to be in ten years of therapy to find out why we're doing so much comparing. "Oh, māna."

And interestingly enough, māna is one of the very last defilements to go. Even after we have uprooted desire and aversion—which would be at the third stage of enlightenment, a huge, huge accomplishment—māna is still there. So this is by way of saying: might as well make friends with it. Because it's going to be there, and it's going to come up in a lot of different ways.

But I found now—and this is also a hugely helpful mental frame—whenever I see it, I'm delighted, because I would rather see it than not see it. And on top of that, every time I see it, "Oh, māna," māna falls away. "Oh, I'm working on arahantship now." So it gives it an extra little boost of encouragement.

We can transform it into real understanding of how our minds are working and how we get caught and how we can be free. And it doesn't take much. That's the beauty of this. So don't make it more of a problem than it is.

Which is another whole teaching. My first teacher was Anagarika Munindra, a very quirky teacher, but a great teacher. And one of the phrases he used—I heard it thousands and thousands of times over the years—he would just say, "Be simple and easy about things. Just be simple and easy." I think that was one of the best teachings I got from him. Because we tend to exacerbate whatever is going on in our mind and build

whole stories and self-judgment and comparing and all of that. But you see how easy it can be when we don't personalize it. It's just māna doing its thing. See it for what it is. Gone. Until it comes next time.

Even the practice itself seems to have the agenda of fixing. How do I untangle from this mind's deep belief and desperation to fix?

Well, I think in a way this ties into the last question, because even if we're not comparing ourselves with somebody else, we could be comparing ourselves with some idealization of where we think we should be.

So one thing would be to try this out: when you see that pattern arising of wanting to fix—and this would be an experiment because I have not applied it in this particular context, but as you raised the question, it seemed very similar—whenever you see the pattern arise of the fixing mind, maybe see that as māna. Because you're comparing your present experience to what you think your experience should be. And it may be that simply recognizing, "Oh, that's māna again," allows the energy of that fixing mind to fall away in recognizing the particular mental factor that's giving rise to that thought.

There's another really important distinction—two different mind states that people often conflate, and because of that conflation, they can create a lot of suffering. It's understanding the difference between aspiration and expectation. For me, that's a really important distinction.

Aspiration—we can have an aspiration for lots of beautiful things: to become enlightened, or to become more compassionate, or more loving, or less judgmental. And the aspiration sets a direction. If that's our aspiration, then we learn one way or another what's the path that will lead to that aspiration.

Expectation is when we're holding on to an expectation that our current experience should be a certain way. And when it's not, then we feel frustrated or despondent or discouraged.

But we can have an aspiration without expectation. Where the direction is clear, we understand the path, but we understand the path is not just linear—it doesn't just get better and better and lighter and clearer. It's not like that, as you well know. It's up and down and up and down.

Even now, after all these years of practice, mostly it's just rolling along pretty smoothly. But sometimes I'll have a sitting and it's like I've never sat before. My mind's just going off on something or wandering a lot. And in the beginning, more toward the beginning, I'd get really upset by that. I'm putting all this effort in and look what's hap-

pening! At this point, I just know so well, having been through a million ups and downs in the practice—both from sitting to sitting, day to day, year to year. Sometimes just going through a really difficult, challenging time. And sometimes it's just going great.

So the more we realize that, then there's a lot more acceptance of whatever the current experience is, realizing that the path is not particularly about particular experiences. It's about how we're relating to whatever is happening.

If somebody came up to you and you just finished a sitting and they asked, "Well, how was your sitting?" Probably if you were concentrated and your body felt at ease and you were pretty mindful, you'd say, "I had a great sitting." And if you were sitting there having been restless and bored and your body hurt, you'd say, "That was a terrible sitting."

That's a completely erroneous assessment. Because it's not about pleasant or unpleasant, easeful or difficult. It's about how mindful we are of whatever it is. So if we're struggling and there's enough mindfulness to put a really big frame around that whole experience—discomfort in the body or the restless mind or whatever it is—and we're relating to it with mindfulness, with awareness, that would be a more skillful sitting than having a really easeful time and being attached to it.

Are you getting this? This is really hard because we are almost hardwired: pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad. But from the point of view of liberation, that's a completely erroneous assessment.

And the Buddha gave one teaching that is so direct and challenging—it makes me sit up straight. He said, as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible.

Well, that's striking at some deep conditioning, because as I say, we're almost hardwired to just go for the pleasant and avoid the unpleasant. And here's the Buddha saying the free mind is like space that can contain everything—pleasant, unpleasant. Can we cultivate that equanimity and that awareness which is just with each of those experiences? And none of them are permanent. They're all part of the passing show.

So somehow, if you could hold all of this, I think it would help free the mind from that wanting some imaginary other experience than what we're actually having. Which is a lot of dukkha.

That's a lot of suffering. Even just if you can imagine energetically what the wanting mind feels like, that quality of wanting something, and then not wanting, just open. Can you feel the relaxation of that?

I know there are a lot of questions, but each question could be an hour. I just want to share another experience. This also happened during the pandemic. I was on self-retreat at home, sitting.

There's one line that we find often in the discourses, a line that people would hear and become enlightened, just hearing this one line. So listen carefully. People miss it because it's so simple. They miss the implication.

The line, which is repeated frequently, is: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

I was sitting, really into the practice, and I remembered this line. It came to mind, but rather than being something my intellect was considering, it wasn't so much up here. I could almost feel it embedded in the flow of my experience. I was there, sitting in the flow of changing phenomena, and then right from within it arose the recognition: oh, whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And it was very obvious that that's what was happening.

But then my mind articulated the import of that line. Things are just moving along. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And in my mind: therefore, there's nothing to want. This is in the context of the meditation practice, because whatever it is that I may be wanting is also going to pass away.

It was just one of those moments of dropping back from this deeply conditioned pattern of wanting, of craving. It's the second noble truth: the cause of suffering is craving, is wanting, even in a meditative sense. Something so simple—recognizing in the midst of your being, in the flow of phenomena, that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, and therefore there's nothing to want. I could just feel the mind drop back into a non-wanting, which is the essence of the practice.

I hope with some of these stories you can see that the formal practice we do in intensive retreats like this is like tilling the ground. We're preparing the soil, creating some degree of inner space and flexibility. When the ground is prepared, as you've been doing over these weeks, then these very simple teachings can really have a profound impact. The insight becomes so vivid.

Sometimes now I'll just use the phrase: oh, there's nothing to want. Even when I'm not aware of wanting being there, that phrase will come to mind, and I can feel myself relax back from a wanting I wasn't even aware of.

A simple example: one time I was just watching the breath, feeling the breath. There's nothing to want. And I realized that even in that simple feeling of the breath, I was with each breath wanting something—wanting a little more calm, wanting concentration, wanting something. Just that remembrance, nothing to want, and you can feel the mind open, feel it become more free.

These very pithy teachings can really be liberating.

Let me read a couple of questions that are closely related. "Since daily life unsettles the mind so much, is there really hope of awakening as a layperson? Or would one eventually need to devote their life fully to the path?" And: "Dear Joseph, what are the odds of waking up? Do we have a real chance?" And one more: "Who or what gets enlightened? What happens to that which gets enlightened after it's enlightened?"

So my new favorite definition of enlightenment is lightening up. And I've seen this over many years now—I've been practicing fifty years or so—and I can see that that's just what the process is. It's lightening up.

So what does lightening up mean? Through practice, and I'll speak a little more about what I mean by "through practice," we become less and less self-referential. Instead of everything revolving around the I and me and mine—what I want and what I like and what I don't like and all of that—the lightening up has to do, on a more superficial level we could say, with just not taking ourselves, our minds, so seriously. And on a slightly deeper level, it involves beginning to weaken the hold of the sense of self that is basically running all our lives until we begin to see through it.

Because that sense of self, that sense of I, is just what feeds the desire and the aversion. "I want this and I don't want that. I like this and I don't like that." It's all rooted in the sense of self. So over time and over years of practice, we begin to see through that sense of self and let go of it—because it's only the *sense* of self that's there. It's not that there *is* a self which is there. The sense of self arises because we're not seeing things correctly. So as we see things more clearly, the sense of self begins to diminish. And we get lighter. And our life becomes a lot simpler and easier.

To answer that first question, I think it's absolutely possible—if not to become an arahant or fully enlightened—to experience different stages of enlightenment, even very high stages, as a layperson. There are many examples of people who have done that. Perhaps one of our most beloved teachers was Dipa Ma, this extraordinary woman from India who had a huge amount of suffering in her life and went on to realize high stages of enlightenment and of samādhi. And her mind was just amazing—as a layperson. She was a mother with a family. So it's definitely possible.

I think what for me has been the arena of lay life most fruitful in terms of the movement toward liberation has to do with the attitude we have toward experiences of suffering and distress in our lives, right in the midst of them. Whether it's relationships or the world—there's plenty of dukkha in the world now—or the condition of our bodies, we all, just as human beings, go through many times of dukkha.

Just as an aside, I recently came across a definition of dukkha. I read it online someplace, and I don't even remember who it was from. But they were defining dukkha, and I loved it. It said: "The inevitability of unwanted experiences." I love this because it just captures it. And it's so obvious, so obviously true. If we're alive, it's inevitable that we will encounter many unwanted experiences one way or another—externally, internally—which is basically a statement of the First Noble Truth.

But what I've found to be really interesting and so helpful and meaningful is to take those times when my mind was really distressed or suffering from one thing or another, and instead of looking to the external causes or assumed causes of what was making me suffer, I've come to a place now where whenever my mind is in a state of distress, it piques my interest—because I want to understand what's going on in my mind that's causing the suffering.

So I'm going to share a teaching that Sayadaw U Pandita gave. It's a very challenging teaching. You may have some reactions—a trigger warning, so to speak. You may be triggered. But I don't think you will be, once it's explained a bit.

He said: "We are one hundred percent responsible for our sufferings."

That's an amazing statement. We are one hundred percent responsible. It does not mean that we're responsible for some of the horrendous conditions that may arise in our lives due to other causes or other people. It's not about that. What it's saying is that how we relate to whatever suffering is present—*that* is what we are one hundred percent responsible for. And how could we not be? Who else could be responsible for how we are relating to what's happening?

And there are even stories, from the Buddha's time and also in current times—people might raise different objections, asking about extreme situations, people being tortured, these horrible, horrible situations. But there are some really inspiring stories of well-practiced people. The ones that come to mind at the moment are stories of some Tibetan lamas who were imprisoned in China—imprisoned, tortured, just really horrible conditions. But many of them, when they came out, would talk about how even in those circumstances, their minds didn't go to hatred, didn't go to aversion. They were taking responsibility for their own minds, even in that extreme.

Hopefully none of us will find ourselves in that kind of situation. But certainly, in the more ordinary dukkha of our lives, I've found it incredibly insightful when my mind is suffering to take interest in it. What's going on? What am I holding onto? What am I pushing away? What am I not allowing? There's always something in the way we're relating to what's happening.

I'll share one story of this. It goes back about forty years—a long time ago—but it was a powerful experience. I had a really close friend who at one point did something that was a complete betrayal of trust. I don't know how many of you have experienced that feeling of betrayal, but it is a horrible feeling. It was so painful, so much suffering. This was somebody close to me.

I was on a self-retreat, and this experience was really surfacing—a lot of feelings and thoughts. But at a certain point, it piqued my interest. What is going on in this situation that's causing so much suffering? Because it felt like a knife in the heart.

As I investigated, and it took some time, I realized that for that knife to hurt, it needed a place to land. If I could let the knife go through... Basically, it lands on the sense of self. It hits that sense of "me." But if there's no place for it to land, it was totally okay. The suffering really disappeared.

Over the years, I've remained friendly with this person. We see each other occasionally, and I don't have any ill will. I see him more clearly now. But it was such a lesson—something can be so painful, yet the suffering is still our responsibility.

Is this making sense to you? Because it's really a powerful teaching. Lately I've been using this phrase to express its importance: don't waste your suffering. We waste it by drowning in it, by feeling sorry for ourselves, or by blaming other people or situations for it. That's a waste, and it creates more suffering.

But if we actually investigate it within ourselves, we are practicing the Four Noble Truths right there. At that point, it's not theoretical. We're in the suffering, we examine it, we see the cause, and we see the end. Right there, we're actually practicing this path of liberation.

This happens more in our life in the world than on retreat. That's why I wouldn't make a big distinction in terms of walking the path. Our life situation can sometimes provide really deep and transformative understandings—liberating understandings.

*Did I answer all of the questions in that collection? I can't remember.*

Here's another: "The Buddha's powers of changing people's perceptions or seeing their past lives—are we to take these at face value? I find my skepticism of this makes me question other teachings."

Well, this was really a challenge for myself and colleagues of my generation. Many of us practiced in India or Thailand, and in those cultures, the idea of rebirth and other planes of existence is simply part of the culture. It's not problematic. People grow up with it.

Hearing these teachings and then coming back to the West—of course, it's not part of our culture. Very often, people are skeptical.

So it was challenging to know how much we should talk about rebirth, or whether to simply not address it at all.

For myself, when Munindraji would be talking about rebirth and the planes of existence, particularly the deva worlds, I loved it. I really liked it. But he would always, when teaching Westerners, say, "You don't have to believe this because believing it is not essential for awakening. You don't have to believe it. It's true, but you don't have to believe it." That was his approach.

I think quite happily, the whole path of liberation can be walked while practicing only those teachings which we can verify for ourselves. It does not require belief in the cosmology, true though it may be. So I would just take what's useful in the teachings. And those things that you don't believe or have questions about or doubt about, just put them aside.

What I would suggest with that, though—and this is a subtle point with important karmic implications, even though some people may not have much belief in karma either—is that there's a difference in how we hold our uncertainty. There's an expression, I think it was Coleridge, the poet, who used the phrase "the willing suspension of disbelief." Because we can be as attached to disbelief as we are to belief.

With things that we don't know, I think it's a much wiser frame to say, "I don't know," and just stay open in the not knowing, rather than declaring, "It's not true." Because saying "it's not true" implies that you know. And you don't know if you don't know.

The reason for this subtlety in terms of karmic implications is that to say something is not true—within the Dharma perspective, when it actually is true—is really just an expression of wrong view, which is an unhelpful mind state. To say "I don't know" is not wrong view. It's simply acknowledging that this is beyond my current level of experience. I think that's a very easeful way of taking the teachings that are useful, that you

can relate to, that you can verify in your own experience, and simply staying open to whatever else is in the teachings that you don't yet understand or believe. Just keep an open mind.

The Buddha talked about different kinds of attachment—attachment to sense pleasures, to the sense of self—but he also talked about attachment to opinions and views. And it is quite remarkable how attached we can be to our opinions about things we know nothing about. Just look at our culture. People have a lot of strong views and opinions about things they know nothing about. But we do the same thing on whatever level. So that would be an interesting part of our own internal working to observe.

These might be the last questions. They're kind of related, so I'm going to read them both. "Dear Joseph, what has helped you most in difficult times? And what's your take, finally, after all these years with the Dhamma?"

They are related. As some of you may know—and I think this is not uncommon in the West among people practicing in the Buddhist tradition—over a lot of years now, I've studied with many different teachers, mostly in the Vipassana tradition, but also a little bit in some Tibetan teachings, a little bit of Zen. So I have experience with a variety of traditions, but mostly with just a lot of different teachers.

And what's really important—for me, what has been important—is recognizing what's in common across all of these. Even though the methodologies are different, and the teachings may sound different, and even the metaphysics or basic philosophical frameworks are sometimes different. This came up very strongly for me, particularly having done a lot of Vipassana and then doing a little bit of Tibetan practice. The metaphysics—they were saying different things about the nature of enlightenment or the nature of awakening.

I felt really torn. These great teachers were saying this; these great teachers were saying that. And in my mind, I was really struggling with the question: who's right? It felt like my whole spiritual path depended on my answering that question.

I was tormenting myself. I was on a two-month Tibetan retreat, and a couple of things in there were just contrary to everything I'd been practicing for thirty or forty years. I was really struggling.

There's an image used by people practicing Zen, the koan method. The image they use is that working with a koan is like having a hot iron ball that you can't spit out and you can't swallow. You're just grasped by this koan. Well, for me, it was like a koan.

You know, the "who's right" became a koan. And I was really struggling and really suffering with that.

And then at a certain point, I realized it was the wrong question. It's not a question of who's right. I framed the resolution of that question—and this would refer to working with all kinds of teachers, even within one tradition, but different teachers, different methods, different methodologies—I framed the resolution in a phrase. Because I studied philosophy in school, so my mind is oriented in that way. The phrase that resolved it all for me was: metaphysics as skillful means, not as statements of truth.

So when I began to hear these different teachings, rather than framing which is true or which is right, I simply took the teachings as skillful means. Then the question becomes: skillful means for what? And here is where all the traditions of Buddhism are unified—skillful means for non-clinging. That's the essence of the free mind in all the Buddhist traditions, whether it's the Burmese or Tibetan or Thai or whatever. In the texts, there are many places where the Buddha says, "Liberation through non-clinging."

So then it becomes really simple. In hearing a teaching, if we put it into practice to some extent, we really want to see: Is this leading us to less clinging, less holding on, less attachment, or not? If it is, then it's serving us. And if it's not, then we're not on the path to greater freedom.

In a way it's really simple. And now when people ask me, "What practice are you doing? What tradition are you in?" I'll say, "I'm practicing not clinging." It's really simple. Although, again, as Munindraji would say, it's simple but not easy. Because those are two different things. It's not complicated.

Going back to what I was talking about earlier in terms of not wasting your suffering—it's always about clinging to something. And the Buddha, the teachings... I'm in awe of the teachings and the Buddha. It's incredible to me how, with what profound clarity, he understood the nature of the mind and body, the nature of the cause of suffering, and the path to freedom. We have a hard time stringing five breaths together, and he understood all of the different mental factors and how they related to one another. The clarity of it is unbelievable.

This is one tiny little part of that clarity: non-clinging. He gave a whole list of the things we normally cling to, in case we're not exactly sure what we're clinging to. And it's pretty simple.

The most obvious one is clinging to sense pleasures. We're attached to pleasure—pleasant sights and sounds and feelings in the body and all the senses. So that's a place to look. Are we attached? Are we clinging to them or not? Has that become the motivating energy in our lives, to just accumulate more and more pleasant experiences? Which it is, I think, for a lot of people. So that's one arena to examine.

The second is attachment to views and opinions, as I just mentioned. It's not so much here where you're not communicating with one another, but when you go back into the world, for those of you who are leaving soon, it would be really interesting to watch in your discussions and conversations with people how often we are attached to our views and opinions.

The third level of attachment doesn't really affect us that much, I think, but was very much part of Indian culture at the time—attachment to rites and rituals as a vehicle for enlightenment. I don't think in our Western culture we have too much of that.

But the last one, and this is really what takes a lot of interest to explore, is attachment to the view of self. Because that's in a way just at the center of all the other attachments. And the doorway of understanding selflessness is hard. This takes time. Impermanence we can all understand and even experience without difficulty, and it's not hard to understand and experience dukkha. But selflessness really is counterintuitive. It takes a lot of interest to explore this.

The doorway to understanding it—and there are actually many—is that we can understand selflessness through a refinement of our perception of change. So the more we see, both in

Our understanding of selflessness begins to open up through our meditation practice, but also in our lives in general, simply by seeing the changing nature of everything. And this opening also comes through our experience of dukkha.

I want to offer one brief elaboration of what selflessness means, because it's the translation of the Pali word *anatta*, non-self. One of the manifestations or experiences of *anatta* is the ungovernability of phenomena. If there were a self, we could simply say, "Let me not have any more anger, no more desire," as if we were in control. But *anatta* means things are following their own laws. It's not happening chaotically—it's happening lawfully—but not based on our will. It's based on the appropriate causes and conditions for things to arise. When the causes are there, phenomena will happen. When the causes are not there, they won't. Things are ungovernable. That's one of the doorways into having a deep intuitive experience of the selflessness of this whole process.

I'll end with this small piece. One of the reflections that the Buddha suggested we do daily—that's how important he thought it was—is a reflection on the universality of growing old and sick and dying. The reflection is: whatever has the nature to grow old will grow old; whatever has the nature to grow ill will grow ill; whatever has the nature to die will die. And after each one, there's a tagline. It's the tagline which is the kicker: "And I am not exempt." Whatever has the nature to grow old will grow old, and I am not exempt. To grow ill, I am not exempt. To die, I am not exempt.

Now, intellectually we all know this, but we don't believe it. There's some deep feeling—I certainly see it in myself, and I imagine we all have it—that until it hits us in the face, we think we are exempt, or at least that we should be. So often I'll be on retreat, doing some walking, and all of a sudden my knee will start hurting. The immediate reaction is, "Why?" And then: I am not exempt. This is what happens.

Just that simple recognition—to drop into the ungovernability of phenomena, to see that things are happening due to causes, not because there's a self governing at all. When this understanding comes up in our daily lives, we are deepening our understanding of selflessness, of non-self, which is really a tremendously liberating understanding in our lives.

So maybe I'll leave you with two mantras: Don't cling. And I am not exempt. I think those will serve you well all the way to full enlightenment.

CHAPTER 52

# Joseph's Responses to Three-Month Yogis' Written Questions

Joseph Goldstein · 1h05

> *In this intimate question-and-answer session from the three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein addresses profound inquiries from yogis on topics central to Buddhist practice and understanding. He begins with preparation for death, emphasizing that mindfulness practice itself—learning to meet each moment without clinging or aversion—is the essential training, while recommending the Buddha's daily reflection: 'Whatever has the nature to grow old, will grow old... and I am not exempt.'*
>
> *Joseph traces his personal evolution regarding rebirth, from initial skepticism through studying the suttas, encountering realized teachers like Dīpā Mā who spoke from direct experience, and ultimately developing an intuitive connection through understanding consciousness as an immaterial phenomenon. He offers the poet Coleridge's phrase 'the willing suspension of disbelief' as a skillful orientation toward teachings we cannot yet verify.*
>
> *The talk delves into stream entry (sotāpanna), explaining the cessation of the conditioned flow of knowing-an-object and the opening to nibbāna—the unborn, unformed reality. Joseph clarifies that supramundane consciousness (lokuttara citta) knows this unconditioned state, and emphasizes that the true measure of awakening lies in whether specific defilements have been uprooted. He offers encouragement through the concept of 'cūḷa sotāpanna' (little stream-enterer), a stage accessible to many practitioners.*
>
> *Practical guidance addresses working with practice doldrums, the relationship between effort and ease, and approaching difficult experiences. Joseph shares his personal mantra 'choose the difficult' while emphasizing the art of balanced effort. He explains boredom as 'lack of attention' rather than quality of experience, and offers the metaphor of wide-angle versus zoom lens for working with overwhelming states. The session concludes with the Buddha's essential teaching: 'Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine.'*

Good to be with you all.

I had to sort through all your questions. I think some of you defied the one question per yogi rule, the conciseness rule, nevertheless. So I pulled out the ones that I think are probably most pertinent to what we're doing here right now on this retreat. If yours isn't directly included, practice with it.

The first question: Continuing to be in the present moment, is there a specific practice that is beneficial in preparing to die? And paired with it: What experiences have informed your view of rebirth? And related to that, as we get older, are there any practices you recommend to prepare for our death?

A couple of things come to mind. In terms of the actual practice—first let me back up. I don't remember my last death, so I'm not speaking actually from direct experience, but I'm just speaking from my understanding in this life, projecting forward.

It seems to me it's the same practice. How we relate to this moment without holding on, without pushing away, simply being mindful of what's there—this seems to me the exact process we'll need in the whole dying process. Particularly being on a retreat of this length, I think is really helpful because there's a chance to practice and develop and strengthen the quality of equanimity with respect to unpleasant experiences. None of us really know what the circumstances of our death will be, but there's a fair chance it'll be uncomfortable. So how are we with unpleasant feeling, unpleasant sensations? How are we with them now? And how we are with them now seems to me the best practice for the whole process of aging, illness, and death. So in terms of the practice, I don't really see much difference.

There is an additional practice, though, which I found to be hugely helpful in deconditioning the reactivity that may arise through the aging, illness, dying process. It's one reflection the Buddha suggested we reflect on daily—he felt it was that important. It's really simple. He said: Whatever has the nature to grow old, will grow old. Whatever has the nature to become ill, will become ill. Whatever has the nature to die, will die.

And the tagline is what I find most helpful: I am not exempt.

What's so striking to me as I've practiced with that—I can be going for a walk, and even with something relatively minor, maybe my knee starts to hurt a little bit, and I can see in my mind my first reaction is, "Oh," you know, it's like, "Oh." And then: I am not exempt. What has the nature for the body to decay and grow old and ill and die?

What's so striking is that even though intellectually we know we're not exempt, we have the feeling either that we are or that we should be. That's why the Buddha said reflect on this daily—just so we really get it into ourselves. We are not exempt. And this is just nature. It's just the law of things. It's not a mistake.

But it's very hard to really integrate that in our way of relating to the world, largely because for most of us, we're so identified with the body. A lot of the practice is really learning to see the impersonality of this physical process. It's following its own natural

laws. We're not in control. We can't always, or even often, have it do what we want it to do. It's just following the law of what has the nature to grow old, grow ill, die—those things will happen.

So I would suggest reflecting on that, and on the line: I am not exempt. I have found that hugely helpful.

Was there another question? What experiences have informed your view of rebirth? Oh yes, so this is perhaps a longer topic.

In our culture, as you know, most of us don't grow up with the idea of rebirth or other planes of existence or really what the Buddhist cosmology is talking about. I had studied Western philosophy in college, and when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand, I first came in contact with Buddhism. So the idea of rebirth was really foreign to me. I had no connection with it at all. And when I look back over these many years, it's been interesting for me to trace my evolution in how I relate to that notion.

The first important piece was through beginning study of the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha talks about rebirth a lot. It's not some little piece that he just added to the teachings. It really informs the meaning of the first noble truth, because the Buddha's talking not only about the difficulties we may face in this lifetime in understanding dukkha, but his view of dukkha and what motivated his own quest for awakening and enlightenment. If you think of this endless cycle of rebirth, then the Four Noble Truths take on a whole different level of meaning and importance. So he spoke about it a lot when you read the suttas, the discourses.

But I began to see a shift in my own relationship to rebirth through my practice in the early years, when so much of what the Buddha said that I was able to verify through my experience turned out to be true. If he said this happens in practice, yes, that's right. And then the next thing, and the next, and the next. So I began to think, well, if he was right about so much, maybe he's right about rebirth too. This was just the beginning of a willingness to be open to the possibility. It still wasn't anything like a strong belief.

This openness to possibility was expressed very well by a line, I think by the poet Coleridge: "the willing suspension of disbelief." Because we can be attached to disbelief as well as being attached to beliefs. The willing suspension of disbelief means that here is some idea which we may not be familiar with, which is not part of our upbringing or conditioning, but here it is in the Buddha's teachings. So we simply suspend our disbelief, which leaves us in a very open space. We don't know, but we're willing to consider. That was kind of a turning point.

Then I met teachers, and one in particular: Dipa Ma. Has anyone spoken about her? She was this extraordinary, just extraordinary woman with amazing realization and metta. She would talk about rebirth from her own experience, because through the development of deep samadhi, deep concentration, there is a methodology for seeing past lives. So she would speak to us about this from her own experience. Of course, that also is not proof, but I had no reason to disbelieve her. She was just such an extraordinary being, an extraordinary yogi. So she was the first one who was talking about rebirth from her own direct experience of it.

Then I met a young Sri Lankan boy—I don't know whether anyone has spoken about Dhammaruwan? There was this young boy from Sri Lanka. At age two or three, he started spontaneously chanting these long Pali texts, whole suttas, like the Satipatthana Sutta, many suttas, as a two-year-old. He had no experience in this life of any of it. And there are recordings of this. After the retreat, you could go online and listen. It's amazing because here's this young boy in the voice of a two-year-old chanting the suttas impeccably, perfectly. And also in a melody that is not even current in Sri Lanka now—an ancient way of chanting. As he grew older, his samadhi, his concentration, was very strong, and he remembered being a chanting monk from hundreds of years ago. He was remembering his past life and saying this is where all of that was coming from. So that was interesting.

Perhaps the last thing I'll say—though I could go on and on with different examples—is what really connected me more deeply with the possibility of rebirth. As my own practice deepened, it's not that I had any memories of past lives, but I began to have a much deeper sense of the nature of awareness, the nature of consciousness as being an immaterial phenomenon. And when I realized that consciousness itself is immaterial, it just made sense to me. I could connect in some way intuitively with the idea that consciousness was not inextricably tied to this physical body, because it's not a physical phenomenon. It didn't seem so unlikely anymore.

People could have many questions about this, and obviously in this life, the brain is part of the process of consciousness arising. But that still doesn't make consciousness itself a material phenomenon. So all of this together led me to an inclination to believe. I realize that none of the things I've said prove it. But when I put them all together, I'm inclined to believe—and we'll see. Which in one way makes the dying process very interesting. What's next, if anything? We'll all find out.

*Question: Now that you mentioned the nature of mind—seeing the empty nature of mind is a high bar. What are some ways to begin to understand this in theory, and how to approach it in practice? Also, in order to cut through our clinging to awareness as the last vestige of "I," how shall we work with and understand the moment of not finding mind when instructed to look for it?*

From the first part of the question, in terms of understanding or experiencing the empty nature of mind, of consciousness—first it's helpful to understand what emptiness means in this regard. People can hear the word "emptiness" and have all kinds of thoughts about what it means. Just generally in English, if we say something is empty, it doesn't even seem that desirable. But in Buddhism, it means something quite specific. Especially in the context of Vipassana practice, emptiness means emptiness of self, or empty of intrinsic existence. It's helpful just to understand that this is what the term refers to.

Different traditions have different methodologies for experiencing it. Within the classical framework of Theravada Buddhism, and especially in the tradition that we practice in, the basic understanding is that our experience unfolds in a pairwise progression of knowing an object. In every moment there's knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, a thought, an image, an emotion. Every moment there's this pairwise progression—the knowing and what's being known.

As the practice deepens, our perception of the impermanence of this progression becomes very refined. It's what I've called over the years "NPMs"—noticings per minute. In the beginning of our practice, the NPMs are a bit low. As our practice deepens, the NPMs get really high. For example, even in the feeling of a breath—if you can remember when you first began your meditation, it was "in-breath, out-breath," as if an in-breath is one thing, or an out-breath is one thing. But as I'm sure you've experienced now with more practice, within the in-breath, how many separate moments of subtle sensations are occurring? In every in-breath, every out-breath.

According to Buddhist psychology, these mind moments—separate individual mind moments knowing an object—it's said there are seventeen trillion per second. I don't know who counted them. But let's at least take it metaphorically: a lot. It's happening very, very rapidly, this arising and passing. And that's why it can be hard to see the impermanent nature of consciousness or awareness. It's like when you have a torch and you whirl it around—it looks like a circle of fire. But actually it's not a circle; it's continual movement. The same thing is happening in this whole flow of our mind-body experience. It feels more or less solid or stable, but it's actually this very rapid flow of things arising and passing.

So there are stages in Vipassana where we have attuned to this pairwise progression, and we really are experiencing it—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. At a certain point, the mind becomes very much attuned just to the disappearance, to the disappearing side. Sometimes it focuses on what's arising, the arising side,

But at another stage, the mind attunes to the disappearing side. Everything's vanishing, vanishing, vanishing, vanishing. When we have that experience, it becomes so clear that consciousness is not self, because each moment it's just disappearing. There's no stability. It doesn't last long enough to be considered self. This gives us a very immediate and strong experience of the selfless nature of consciousness, the empty nature of consciousness.

So this is one approach to understanding what emptiness of consciousness or awareness means. But there's another approach, which was indicated in one of the questions. Some techniques suggest looking for the mind and then realizing that it can't be found.

One way of doing this—and sometimes I'll do this in my own practice now because I found it to be very immediately effective—sometimes when I'm sitting and there are different sounds happening... Now, when we're hearing sounds, first of all, it's effortless. We don't have to make an effort to hear. When the sound arises, the awareness of hearing is right there. So when sounds are arising, sometimes I'll just prompt my mind with the question: Can I find what's knowing the sound? Right in the moments of experiencing the sound. I'm hearing things. Oh, can I find what's knowing it? And then I'm actually turning the attention back onto the knowing aspect, turning the attention back onto the knowing. Can I find it? There's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening, because I'm still hearing it. So right there we get a very immediate sense of the empty, selfless nature of awareness—because there's nothing to find.

Does this make sense? You could play with this. It's interesting because this particular method I didn't really come across in the Theravada teachings, but I find it in Zen teachings, in Tibetan teachings—this very methodology of looking for the mind and then not finding. As one of the great Tibetan masters said, "The not finding is the finding." That's what's to be understood: that it can't be found. And it has a very immediate release from distress.

Sometimes I'll be walking, just living my life, but there's something disturbing my mind about something. Because I know that little dialogue with Bodhidharma so well, all I have to do is—I'm going along, caught up in some train of thought that's distressing in some way or other—and all I have to do is say, "Oh, already pacified." I don't have to go through the whole sequence, because I know: it can't be found, already pacified. It's an immediate channel to peace of mind. So I recommend it.

Would you please talk about stream entry? How does one know stream entry has been realized? What are the signs? How does the practice change? And can you please describe what an awakened mind resting in natural awareness looks and feels like?

Okay. I picked the hard ones.

I think the simplest description the Buddha gave of the awakened mind—and in fact, this was one way he described Nibbana—he said: the mind free of greed and hatred and delusion. I like that because it's very pragmatic. It's not abstract and it's not some metaphysical whatever. It's pointing very directly to the qualities in our mind and to the potential of freeing the mind from those defilements, of having greed and hatred and delusion uprooted so they don't arise again.

One time we asked Dipa Ma what was in her mind, and she said, "Love, concentration, and peace." That seems like a pretty good description of the awakened mind.

Reflecting back on the description of this pairwise progression—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object—this is just the whole play of samsara. This is our life. This is actually what's happening: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

So the moment of stream entry... as our practice goes through the various stages of insight, when all the factors—basically the factors of enlightenment—come into balance and are matured, and we have come to a place of great equanimity, at a certain point that flow of knowing an object can stop, opening to the reality which is called nibbana, or the unborn, or the unformed, or the unmanifest. It is its own reality, which we can experience in that moment of the process of knowing an object coming to an end. At first that can be just for a moment, a split-second moment. But because there is an opening to a reality completely apart from this conditioned flow of phenomena, it transforms our whole understanding.

It's as if we're experiencing this whole process referring to a self-center, and that's how we're living our lives. Then in that moment, it's opening to the zero-center. In that moment, we really have uprooted the view that there is some self-center to the process. The whole view of self has been uprooted because there's been the experience of going beyond the conditioned process—the opening to the zero center.

There are some subtleties with this, and often some confusion. Sometimes it's described as though in that moment there is no knowing at all. But actually, there is a subtle knowing, and this is called—we're really getting into the weeds here—super-

mundane consciousness. The knowing of nibbana, the knowing of the zero center, is supermundane consciousness, because it's not the usual consciousness of knowing an object. It's a special kind of knowing that takes nibbana as the object.

The reason this is important is that it allows there to be the experience of that zero center. If there was no supermundane consciousness to know it, we would have no idea of what it was, because there was no knowing of it. But this knowing is very subtle—very subtle and supermundane. That's why the great masters who have mastered the ability to drop into that space can speak very directly from experience of the nature of that nibbanic state.

Are we together on this? This is really getting into some subtle aspects.

So how does one know? Even from that first moment of stream entry, which is the first stage of awakening where the view of self has been uprooted, sometimes it's really clear. Sometimes it's like a lightning bolt—such a strong break in the flow of conditioned phenomena. It can be such a powerful moment, and the understanding that the view of self has been uprooted is sometimes incredibly clear, so there's just no doubt.

But it's also possible for this experience to happen in a less powerful way, and people may have a certain experience of these moments of stopping and not really be clear about what it is. Even the teachers may not be clear, because the Buddha taught there are five different causes for a cessation experience, and only one of them is the experience of nibbana. People can experience a cessation because of too much concentration, or too much calm, or too much rapture, or too much sloth. With that imbalance, people can sometimes have these moments of cessation and maybe think, "Well, this is it." And it might be, but it might not be. They may not know, and sometimes it's hard even for the teacher to know.

Generally, when we're tracking somebody's meditation, we assess the path by putting the experience in the context of where their practice is at, so sometimes that's an indication. But the real indication, and I think this is really important—because these states are so subtle and can easily be misinterpreted or misunderstood—the real measure is whether the defilements appropriate to each particular stage of awakening have been uprooted or not.

That we can see over time. If we've had different experiences, we can really watch our own minds and see whether that view of self has really been uprooted or not, whether doubt about it has been uprooted or not. I think that's the most important indication.

Another aspect of it is that there's a much greater integration of ethical behavior from that moment. There are just certain actions that can't be done after that experience.

These would be the measures.

Do you have any questions about anything I just said? Because this is really getting down into some of the depths of practice. I just want to make sure that it was reasonably clear.

*Can you expand on how this realization changes your practice?*

So the question was how this realization changes one's practice. One of the most significant ways is that one of the defilements that is uprooted at that first stage is doubt. It's kind of like when you put your hand in fire—do you have any doubt that it burns? No, you know from experience. And there's nothing anybody could say that would shake that knowledge.

It's the same thing. When one has had that experience, doubt about it and about the Buddha's teaching and the path, that doubt is uprooted because one has had the experience for themselves. And that's a huge benefit, because I'm sure at different times, before that level, all kinds of doubts can arise in the mind about the path, about the practice, about our own ability. Having that uprooted really matters, and that's one of the reasons it is said that from that point on, full enlightenment is inevitable. It still may take numbers of lifetimes, but one is inevitably on the path.

But I also want to give you some good news. Stream entry in Pali is called *sotāpanna*. There is also a stage called *cūḷa sotāpanna*, which means "little sotāpanna." Little sotāpanna is actually a stage of vipassanā practice which comes much before that. It's that stage when we've developed enough concentration and mindfulness so we're not struggling with the hindrances all the time, we're kind of in the flow, and we're in that stage of seeing the rapid rising and passing away of phenomena.

So this is not some far-off attainment. This is well within the capacity of yogis practicing, and many have experienced this stage of arising and passing away. Even from that stage, little sotāpanna, it is said the path is set. You're on the path.

I think that's good news, because that is really quite accessible to many practitioners. And it is a very significant stage of insight—we're just seeing the rapid rise and passing of everything.

*It seems that many great teachers went through grueling periods of practice. Your example with Sayadaw U Pandita, for instance. Is this necessary or helpful to advance on the path? Sitting through pain is not in the seven factors of awakening, but joy and calm are. Can you comment on the context of wise effort?*

So I want to share my view of the Buddha mind—not that I'm being presumptuous or anything.

We all have a certain comfort zone in our experience, whether it's physical, emotional, or psychological. We have a certain realm of experience that we feel comfortable in. In life, but also very much so in our practice, we come to the edge of our comfort zone. Maybe it's dealing with physical pain. Maybe it's dealing with difficult emotions. We get to that edge where we're not so steady, not so stable.

But that's actually the place we want to be in our practice. Because if we can relax into whatever that experience is, then our comfort zone gets a little bigger. And then we get to another edge, and we practice with that, and it gets a little bigger.

So my projection of the Buddha mind, or the enlightened mind, is a mind without edges. And a mind without edges is a mind without fear. It's just total openness with whatever is arising.

As a general principle, that's why it's helpful to play the edges, not to just retreat into one's comfort zone. And there's another reason why this is so helpful in terms of applying a spiritual practice to our life.

I'd be sitting there, and in that situation, yes, I could change my position and the pain would go away. But there are many situations in life that people go through where we can't simply walk away from it. Where there's some disease or illness or accident, something happening to the body where the pain is there. Maybe it will be part of the dying process—we don't know. But in those situations, there's not an option just to change posture. How are we going to be with that? When we're in a situation that is not in our control, that we cannot change immediately or move away from, have we developed the strength, the resilience, the openness to at least approach the possibility of: Can I be with this? Can I open to this?

And sometimes it gets really challenging. For me, before I started sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, I had been practicing a long time, and things were going along really, really well. My body was at ease and my mind was just flowing along. But one of the things I realized in retrospect was that it wasn't really going anyplace. I was in this very pleasant meditative mode, but I was coasting—because Sayadaw so emphasized right effort. And I'll just say, some teachers emphasize that; I've had other teachers who did

not emphasize it so much. But for me at that time, because I had been coasting along in my practice and kind of enjoying it, his instruction was like a metaphorical kick in the pants. Okay, Joseph, get to work.

Even though it was challenging, I appreciated that encouragement. At that point in my practice, I started using a mantra for myself: choose the difficult. If there was a choice, choose the difficult—which went totally against my nature, because my nature was to choose the easy. It hardly made sense to choose the difficult. But in working with Sayadaw, it was very much about choosing the difficult. And my practice became tremendously energized by that kind of right effort.

It's also important to say that this kind of effort can get out of balance. So there's an art to upping the energy level, the right effort level, but doing it in a completely balanced way. And that's an art. We have to experiment and watch ourselves. Are we getting too tight? Okay, we need to relax a bit. Too relaxed? We need to tighten a bit. And that's an ongoing process. It's not that we find right effort and then we have it for the rest of our meditative career. It's like tuning the strings of an instrument—it continually needs to be tuned. And that's what we have to do in our own practice with right effort.

Here's something related that came up as questions: If you feel like your practice has stalled, do you have any tips for re-energizing the practice without jumping to over-efforting or using will? And what would you say are the three aspects of retreat practice you've seen yogis take for granted or not lean into—where they've held back or shrunk back?

I think it's really helpful to understand that in this long meditative journey—and it's not about six weeks and it's not about three months; this is over years and years of practice—there's a real commitment. Not always intensive practice, obviously, but periods of intensive practice. Our life is really informed by our commitment to the path. And there will inevitably be times when we're in the doldrums, where we're practicing and nothing much seems to be happening. I've had that experience at different times, different stages. I remember very clearly one time when I was still practicing in India, and it just felt like I was not going anyplace.

I was kind of dragging myself through the practice and wasn't seeing much result or particular benefit at that time. After struggling with this for some while, I finally resolved it for myself. I gave myself a little talking to. I said, "Joseph, just sit and walk. Sit and walk. That's your job. Let the Dharma take care of the rest."

So that's what I started doing. I thought, okay, if it's the doldrums, fine. My job is simply to sit and walk, sit and walk, sit and walk. And when I stopped fighting with the experience of being in the doldrums and could simply accept, okay, this is what's happening, I'm going to just keep doing my part—I can't remember now, this was a long time ago, how long it took, but it didn't take that long until the wind came back. I don't know what the sailing term is, when the wind carries you out of the doldrums—but the Dharma wind returned and the practice kept unfolding.

I think that is really the main message. And it's related to the pāramī of patience, where things are not unfolding according to our wants or desires or expectations. They're following their own laws. The Dharma path is unfolding in its own time. And if we understand the practice and the path, and we just keep taking the next step, it will inevitably lead to purification of mind, inevitably lead to awakening, because we're going in the right direction.

But the path isn't a straight line going upward. It's a sine curve—rising and falling—but the slope of the curve is going up. Generally we're not patient enough to see that. We're just judging: we're up here and we feel great, we're down here and we feel terrible. This is normal. This is how it goes. But the slope of the curve is going up, and that's why perseverance and patience matter. We just keep going, and the whole Dharma unfolds.

I would really like to encourage you to remember this, because I know it so deeply from my own practice. And working for fifty years with yogis, I've seen the same thing over and over again. There are specific things one could do, but I wanted to mention this general attitude, which I think is foundational.

One of the aspects of the doldrums is that the mind gets bored. It feels like nothing much is happening, and we just get bored and lose energy. Back in the sixties or seventies, there was a very famous psychologist named Fritz Perls. He was the founder of Gestalt psychology, which in those years was a big thing. I came across an understanding of boredom—something he said which totally resonated with me and the practice. He said, "Boredom is lack of attention." Boredom doesn't have to do with what's happening, with the experience. It has to do with how close our attention is to the object.

So if you're in a kind of doldrum and the mind is getting bored, see what happens if you can remember this. Because in that state—which I call "more or less mindful"—we're going along and we're kind of there. Kind of. But we're not really closely connected to the object, closely feeling it. What I've found is that when my mind is feeling

bored or not so connected, I simply bring the mind in close, feeling, for example, the sensations of a step really closely. And it's amazing. In that moment of close attention, the boredom is gone, the disconnect is gone, the energy is there.

So there are ways of adjusting while we're exploring and investigating. When we're feeling that "nothing much happening" stage, we can really look at how our mind is relating to the moment's object, and almost always, it's because our attention is not close. We're not feeling it closely.

And you know this. I'm sure you've all had this experience. For somebody on the outside who hasn't done practice, if they saw you doing walking meditation back and forth, they must think, "That is the most boring thing in the world."

What could be more boring? But I'm sure you've had the experience, at least at times when you're here, where you are so embodied and feeling the sensations of the body and the movement. The mind can be totally engaged for a long period of time. We could be walking for half an hour or an hour, completely engaged in it. From the outside, the activity would be incredibly boring. But boredom has to do with lack of attention. And so it's just to remember this, because sometimes the attention does get a little distant from the object. But you can adjust that.

Here's another question that's related: "I often lack a friendly attitude in mindfulness practice. There is anxiety and a lot of striving. The mind has been feeling more like an ice cube than water for quite a while. Any suggestions?"

I have suggestions about everything. Whether they're good or not, that's another matter.

Are you familiar with the paintings of Jackson Pollock? For those of you who are not, he's an abstract artist. Big, big paintings with swirls and splatters of color throughout the whole canvas. From one perspective, one might call it a busy mess, because there's so much going on. But you put a frame around the whole picture and you step back and you take in the whole of it, and you see it as a great work of art. If you were looking at just the swirls, it would be the equivalent of an agitated mind. But you put a frame around it and the whole relationship to it changes.

It's often hard to remember that when we're having a lot of agitation or confusion or whatever those various mind states are. Sometimes by trying to dive into it and sort it out, it can get overwhelming. But sometimes when there's some big, powerful energy going on, whether in the body or the mind, we don't need to do that. We can put a big frame around the whole. Even if one would kind of step back and just make the note "confusion" — it's not necessarily trying to figure out, "Oh, why am I confused and how

can I change it?" It's just stepping back: "Oh, confused mind." And in that moment, you are in a proper relationship to that whole mind state, and you're not caught up in the suffering of it because you're being mindful of it.

One kind of image or metaphor that you might call to mind in terms of your practice: sometimes a zoom lens is appropriate, where you're really zooming in and seeing in a very precise and refined way, moment after moment, what's happening. But sometimes a wide-angle lens is appropriate. If there's some big thing going on in the mind or in the body and you just can't dive into it because it's too agitating, put a wide-angle lens on the camera of your mind and just take in the whole thing. Then it's possible to be with anything. And I think it will bring the mind back to a place of ease and of balance.

Because there's nothing, there's no experience we can have that is outside of the capacity to be mindful of it. Whatever it is — sometimes it's really pleasant, sometimes it's really unpleasant, sometimes it's confusing, sometimes it's peaceful — it doesn't matter. Whatever it is, we can be mindful of it. We just have to frame it properly.

We're at an end. I'm trying to think of some profound last words. Well, you can always count on the Buddha to have some profound last words.

In terms of what the whole methodology of the practice is about, I think it's important to realize this, because sometimes we get caught up in an overemphasis on technique or method as if that's the essence of the practice. But the essence of the practice is using the various techniques and methods and methodologies for one end. And the Buddha expressed this really clearly. He said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine."

Whoever understands this, understands the whole of the Dharma.

It's helpful, even as we engage in the method of practicing mindfulness, to reflect on the purpose of it all. The insight and wisdom we're cultivating is an opening to the full range of our experience without clinging to any of it as being I or mine. Not the body, not the mind, not thoughts, not emotions—nothing.

This leaves us open to the whole range of experience, but from a place of freedom.

And that's really what this practice is about.

CHAPTER 53

# Enlightenment or Bust (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · 57 min

> *In this profound retreat talk, Joseph Goldstein examines the Buddha's teachings on craving (taṇhā) as the fundamental force that keeps us bound to the wheel of saṃsāra. Drawing from the suttas, he explores two primary fields of craving: the desire for sense pleasures (kāma-taṇhā) and the more subtle craving for becoming (bhava-taṇhā). Goldstein invites practitioners to investigate these patterns directly, asking the same questions the Buddha asked himself: What is the gratification in the world? What are its dangers and drawbacks?*
>
> *The talk offers a striking personal account of how contemplating the phrase "whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away" transformed Goldstein's meditation practice. He describes recognizing the subtle forward-leaning quality of wanting even within meditation itself, and the profound peace that arose when the mind settled back into not-wanting. This experience, he suggests, offers a taste of the third noble truth—the cessation of dukkha through the cessation of craving.*
>
> *Using René Daumal's allegory of climbing Mount Analogue, Goldstein emphasizes that understanding our destination informs how we take each step. He encourages practitioners to experiment with dropping in the phrase "not wanting" during meditation, cultivating what one Tibetan teacher called "short moments many times." The talk concludes with an invitation to let ourselves be found by the Dharma, recognizing that liberation is not about getting or becoming, but about letting go.*

There's a book by the author René Daumal called *Mount Analogue*. It's an allegorical description of a spiritual journey using the metaphor of climbing a mountain, and he offers some very good advice about how to undertake this journey. He said: Keep your eye fixed on the way to the top, but don't forget to look right in front of you. The last step depends upon the first. Don't think you're there just because you see the summit. Watch your footing. Be sure of the next step, but don't let that distract you from the highest goal. The first step depends upon the last.

I love that last little piece. The last step depends upon the first—we have to take the first steps. But the first step also depends on the last. And so even though we're at or toward the beginning of the retreat, this evening I'd like to talk a bit about the end of the path, because the direction of our journey, the direction of our first steps, depends on our understanding of what the last step is. It's helpful to have that comprehensive view of the direction we're going in.

The French philosopher, political activist, and mystic Simone Weil wrote: "What people are looking for is not wrong, but they are looking for it in the wrong place." That's us. Although we may call it by many different names—we might call it love or peace or enlightenment or awakening—in some fundamental way, what we're all looking for is a genuine happiness, a lasting kind of happiness, a sense of completion, a sense of fulfillment. This is precisely what the Buddha's teachings are about. They're about finding or realizing or awakening to this potential that's within us.

The problem is, as Simone Weil says, most of us are looking for it in the wrong place. It's just this misdirected craving for happiness, our misdirected desire for happiness, that keeps the whole wheel of samsara turning. Samsara is the Buddhist term for the endless cycle of conditioned existence. Our misdirected desire for happiness keeps us bound to this wheel, endlessly turning.

The Buddha spoke to this very directly. Often he would be talking to the order of monastics, referring to them as bhikkhus. But bhikkhus in a more general sense also means everyone on the path. Everybody walking on the path could be referred to as a bhikkhu. So when you hear the Buddha give his teachings and he says "bhikkhus," he's talking to you. Listen with that ear.

"Bhikkhus, I do not envision even one other fetter, fettered by which beings go wandering and transmigrating for a long, long time, like the fetter of craving."

That's very explicit. He really nails what this quality of mind is that keeps us transmigrating—even within this one lifetime—through all the ups and downs of our lives.

So what is craving? Although we're familiar with that word, it's not esoteric, it's probably not one that we use all that often in our daily lives. Yet the Buddha is really highlighting this particular quality of mind. It's worth exploring and trying to understand its meaning and nuances. What is craving, and how do we experience it in our lives?

Craving or desire is the translation of the Pali word *tanha*. Tanha means thirst, or sometimes it's translated as the fever of unsatisfied longing. I really like these translations of thirst and fever even more than craving, because those words can give us a visceral sense of what the mind quality is like. Just think of when you were really thirsty and how compelling that is, what a strong primal feeling it is. That's the meaning of tanha, which is often translated as craving or desire.

In English, we often use the words desire and craving interchangeably, but this can be confusing because desire in English has a wide range of meanings. We use it in many different ways. Sometimes desire does mean the thirst or fever of longing associated with greed and grasping and clinging—sometimes that's exactly what desire means. But sometimes desire simply means the motivation to do something.

You know, I have the desire for awakening, or I have a desire to serve, to be of help. That's the use of the word desire in a very different way.

So when we hear the Buddha talk about the end of desire and the end of craving, we really need to understand that he's referring to a very specific kind of desire. There are many other kinds of desires that can be quite wholesome, and we don't want to confuse these two. For tonight's talk, I will be using the terms desire and craving interchangeably, but keep in mind that in other contexts the word desire can mean many other things. We don't want to get confused by this linguistic usage.

The Buddha pointed out with his usual incisive clarity some particular fields of craving that misdirect us from the happiness and peace that we aspire to. Tonight I'd like to explore two of these areas of craving. The first is the craving for sense pleasures, and the second is what the Buddha called craving for becoming.

The craving and desire for sense pleasures is the most obvious. This is not hard to see; it's the one we are most familiar with. These are all the pleasant sights and sounds and scents and tastes and sensations in the body—all these pleasant, agreeable sense objects that we desire, that we want, that we crave. They're desirable and agreeable to us. We could also include all the pleasant states of mind. This craving or desire for sense pleasures is simply our usual engagement with the world.

As we're living our lives, we enjoy and want pleasant experiences, and as much as possible, we'd like to avoid unpleasant experiences. It just seems so natural, completely natural, that of course we want pleasant things and want to avoid unpleasant things. And it is natural and normal.

But here, right here, is where the Buddha begins a very interesting analysis of this situation. He did not condemn sense pleasures as being sinful—that's not at all part of the Buddhist framework. Rather, in his analytic, and we might even say scientific, introspective approach, he began to ask some very pointed questions about his life experience.

The first question he asked of himself was: What is the gratification in the world? That's a fundamental question—what gratifies us in the world, in our experience? As a young prince, as it's told, he enjoyed the whole range of sense pleasures. He led a very privileged life in that sense and was fully immersed in the enjoyment of these pleasures, so they were not at all foreign to him.

And then, as it's related in the discourses, the thought came to him: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world. That makes sense. Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, that's the gratification we get from it. If there was no pleasure and joy in the world, beings would not become enamored of it. We become enamored of the world, of sense pleasures, precisely because they do bring us a kind of happiness. We need to acknowledge that. That's our common understanding of our lives, isn't it? Different kinds of sense pleasures bring a certain kind of happiness to us, and that's why we keep going after them. It's precisely because there is this gratification. The Buddha isn't saying there's no gratification in sense pleasures; he's saying there is gratification, and that's why we crave them.

But rather than simply listening to the Buddha's words, it's always good to receive them as instructions for our own introspection. It's not about hearing the Buddha say something and then either agreeing or disagreeing—that's not the point at all. The Buddha is pointing to something, and he's inviting us to look at where he's pointing so we can see for ourselves. We can take the very same questions he asked of himself

and ask it of ourselves. What is the gratification that we find in our lives? That would be worth reflecting on. What different experiences in the body, in the mind, are we enamored of? What different kinds of experiences do we desire and want?

That would be an interesting internal survey—just to get a very clear picture. Instead of simply muddling through life, going after this and going after that, we could really get a clear picture. Yes, this is where I find gratification. These are the delights that I become enamored of. In this way, we personalize these teachings.

Our cravings and gratifications seem to come in a very wide range of intensities and frequencies. On one end of the craving spectrum might be the obsessive desires that consume our lives. There might be addictive desires for food, for sex, for alcohol, for drugs, for success, for power, for fame, for wealth, for possessions, for comfort. Even for some people there's an obsessive desire for love. The mind can create this craving and fall into this craving for a wide range of different experiences.

It's interesting that most, or a good part, of the great literature of the world is really about these obsessive cravings that one might say infect human beings. And we're all part of this. We can see this in ourselves to some degree or other. In so many ways, Western culture just feeds this kind of craving. In fact, we could almost say the whole society revolves around it. One of my favorite examples was a sign in a store window in New York that said, "Don't let desire pass you by." The country would probably collapse if we let desires pass us by! So that's the message we grow up with—feed the desire, as if it's a good thing. It takes a lot of care to begin to unpack this conditioning within ourselves because it is so pervasive.

Or we may have sense desires and cravings and wants not necessarily on this obsessive level that consumes our lives, but still as the driving force behind many of our actions. What drives us to do things in the world? There will be a wide range of motivations, but it would be very interesting to pay attention and see to what extent desire or wanting or craving for sense pleasures is driving our actions—just so we get a clear picture of our lives and the choices we're making.

We can also watch desires, and this is really interesting on retreat. We can watch desires as just quickly passing thoughts in the mind, passing thoughts of wanting. What I've found interesting is to see even these light passing thoughts, to often see how deeply persistent they are. I've had many examples of this being on retreat. I could be sitting and walking, and maybe during walking meditation the thought will come, "Oh, a cup of tea would be nice." I just watch it come and go. Take a few more steps. "Oh, yeah, cup of tea." Take a few more steps, just let it come and go. "Cup of tea." A few more steps. "Cup of tea." And at some point, go get the cup of tea.

It's like a blade of grass pushing up through cement—this very small thing, but with such deep roots. Craving and desire is a primal energy within us. So even though in particular situations the content may seem trivial, the energy behind it is not trivial. We really want to begin to explore this aspect of our lives because it plays such a powerful role.

It's also very helpful to see how seemingly trivial desires, momentary desires, can sometimes strengthen into really strong habits. We go from "I want" to "I need" to "I must have." That becomes the trajectory.

Just as a totally ridiculous example of this powerful tendency: I was on a self-retreat at home, and I was in the habit of enjoying a cup of coffee in the morning for breakfast to get the whole system going. I had all the paraphernalia—the coffee beans, the

grinder—making the perfect cup of coffee. One day I go downstairs and the coffee grinder didn't work. The first word that came to my mind: disaster. And in that moment, I felt it to be that.

I mean, given the state of the world, a broken coffee grinder doesn't really rise to the level of disaster—but it felt like that because of the power of the habit, the power of the wanting, the power of craving. I had to laugh at it, finally.

So many of these different patterns of craving and desire are so familiar to us. It's just how we live. It's just what our lives are about. They seem like the very ordinary fabric of life. This is what life is about. And because they're so much a part of who we take ourselves to be—we really, in a way, define ourselves and define our personality by the things we want and the things we desire—very often they're invisible. We're just not paying attention because they seem so ordinary.

So just as an experiment, a retreat environment while you're here would be a very good opportunity to notice the gratification that comes from even very simple sense pleasures. Just so you attune to the dynamics of anticipated sense pleasure, and then the wanting, the craving, and then the gratification. It goes from being a theoretical description that the Buddha laid out to something we internalize the experience of. We understand it from the inside.

You might notice, just during the day, what things give you moments of delight. Here they're probably limited, but there are enough. What do you become enamored of, even on a slight scale? Maybe it's lunch—all the good food, and you can feel that kind of anticipation. We'll back up a minute. Notice the difference between when you're doing walking meditation back and forth and when you're walking to lunch. You might be walking just as slowly, but energetically, there's something different. We're enamored. We're desiring, craving that pleasant hit.

Or maybe it's the hot shower in the morning. Or a particularly delectable moment is when, after a long day, you just lie down in bed—that first moment, it's delightful. And we do become rather enamored of it.

You can also investigate this conditioning in the enjoyment of pleasant fantasies in the mind. It's not only the physical senses. The same dynamic is at work with pleasant, pleasurable mental experience. It's possible to spend a long time on retreat just immersed and lost in pleasant fantasies. They might be pleasant food fantasies, or maybe really exciting sexual fantasies, or fantasies about your next perfect relationship. Whatever it may be, the mind is very creative, and we can spend a long time just enjoying the pleasure.

So at some point in this investigation, one might resonate with the Buddha's words: "Whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found." Now, that seems like a very ordinary statement, but it would be really useful to reflect on. Whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found.

We've all enjoyed an endless number of agreeable things. Do we have that sense that whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have already found? Or are we still holding out for some fantastic new taste, or some unbelievably pleasant touch sensation? Do we still have the hope that there's something else out there that's going to do it for us?

If we can come to some sense—based on our own experience—that whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found, we might relax a little bit. Instead of that endless quest for the next hit of something, we might recognize that it's not going to be really any different than any of the previous pleasant hits we've already had. But we're seduced. Oh, the next one is going to be the big one.

Now, the Buddha did not stop in his understanding of gratification and what provides it. He then went a bit further in his exploration. "Bhikkhus"—that's you—"I set out seeking the dangers of the world."

So first he's looking at what is the gratification in the world, which is the pleasure of the sense delights. Then he said, well, what is the danger of the world? And "danger" is one translation of the Pali word *ādīnava*. There are other translations which are a little more colloquial, and I like them. So we might think of this as: what are the drawbacks of the world? Or the disadvantages? Or the downside of things?

And he continued: "Whatever dangers or downsides there are in the world, that I have also found." Namely—

that the world is impermanent, and because of that, ultimately unreliable, because nothing lasts, subject to change.

So this is, again, not esoteric understanding. If we're paying attention, we can, I think, relate quite easily to this comprehension of, yes, there are all these pleasures and gratifications, but there is a downside in experience. The downside is that things are impermanent, unreliable, subject to change.

But here's where most of us and the Buddha may take slightly different paths. For us, how many times when things are really good, when things are going well, when they're easeful, when we're enjoying our lives, when things are just rolling along in an easeful way—how often do we have enough interest and foresight and wisdom, right in the

midst of those good times, to ask the question, "Well, what's the downside here?" When I look at my own experience, not that often. Mostly I'm immersed in just the pleasure of the enjoyment.

But that's of course what makes the Buddha the Buddha. He didn't just stop there. He said, okay, in the midst of this, acknowledging that there is that kind of sense gratification—so he's not denying that—but in the midst of it, he asks that further question: Well, right in the midst of this experience, is there a downside? Is there a drawback?

There are several ways of understanding what these drawbacks of sense pleasures are. And again, it's worth just reflecting on it in our own lives because we're so easily seduced by the gratification. We don't often look underneath.

One of the downsides, one of the drawbacks, is that in the end, these sense pleasures don't deliver on their promise of happiness. We think they will, and we hope they will, but they don't, precisely because they don't last. We believe that they'll bring us happiness because of the pleasant feelings that come when we have pleasant sense experience. There's a pleasant feeling that we enjoy. And these experiences do bring some kind of happiness, so it's not to deny that. They do bring a kind of happiness for some time. But all of these pleasant feelings that come with beautiful sights and sounds and smells and touch and sensations and thoughts—with all of those pleasant experiences, the pleasant feelings associated with them are very, very transitory. And we know that.

This is what's so amazing to me. When we look back on our lives and look back on all the pleasant things we've experienced—which are countless—when we look back, their ephemeral nature is so apparent. It's like, where are they now? Where's the pleasure of lunch now? Totally gone.

So what's so amazing to me is we know this when we look back, but when we look ahead, in anticipating the next pleasures, we just forget what we just learned. As if the next one is going to do it in a way that none of the other ones we've experienced have. Our minds are a trip.

And for me, the interest and the power and the delight in the meditation is just this: learning the tools for examining and understanding our own minds and our own hearts and how we get involved in things that just create more suffering—and how it's possible to disentangle from that. That's really what we're doing here. It's this exploration of your own experience.

If we keep going after these momentary sense pleasures, or even ones that last for some little bit of time but eventually end, as they all do—how many people are just living their lives this way? This is their life. It's just always looking forward to the next

pleasant hit of something. And then that passes, and then looking for the next hit, and the next hit, and the next. And before we know it, our life's at an end, without ever having come to a sense of fulfillment or a sense of peace or a sense of completion.

So this is not an insignificant pattern. And that's why the Buddha gave such importance to understanding craving. It's the second noble truth. This is the cause of suffering in our lives.

As lay people, we are living in the world of sense objects, sense pleasures, sensory delights. Most of us are not leading renunciate lives. So to one extent or another, we are engaged in this arena. But still, each one of us, everyone here, on some level knows that it's not really the path to happiness. Because if you believed that it was, you'd be on some nice vacation someplace and you wouldn't be here struggling with pain in your knee. So something brought you here. And it's not so easy to arrange to be here.

So for each one of us, there is some very deep wisdom already there, because that's what brought us here together. We all understand on some level that a growing realization of the Dharma really does open up vast potentials for a much deeper kind of happiness.

The first drawback of relying on sense pleasures for happiness is that they don't deliver. Ultimately, it's a very temporary enjoyment. The second danger, the second drawback of sense craving, is when this desire or craving becomes an obsessive force in the mind, which can lead to so many unwholesome actions. Newspapers are filled with stories of people doing all kinds of violent things or harmful things, driven by one kind of craving or another.

One of my very favorite translation stories, which many of you have probably heard: One time I was sitting on a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. He would speak in Burmese and then the translator would translate it into English. At one point he was talking about sense desires, and he went on for quite a while—maybe five minutes or ten minutes in Burmese. Then the translator translated that whole long thing into four words: "Lust cracks the brain." Lust cracks the brain. It does. Have you noticed? When that's strong, when that's really strong in the mind—it could be lust for anything—but when that's strong, we go crazy. People do so many harmful things driven by that energy.

So we need to take care. The force of craving is not only about the little broken coffee grinder and the disaster that was. Sometimes craving really is a powerfully destructive force, and we see it in the world. When we take an interest in how all this is working, it can really lead to a much fuller, more engaged, wholesome, and skillful relationship with the world.

This is the first arena of craving, and I spend so much time on it because it's so powerful in our lives and it's so obvious. This is not an esoteric teaching, but we need to pay attention to it. And again, I just want to reiterate: all of these Dharma talks and everything we do here—it's not a question of listening and you either believe or you don't believe. It's all an invitation to look for yourselves. The Buddha is just pointing us to take a look within ourselves to see: Does this resonate? Is this true? Because that's where the transformative value is. It's not in the intellectual comprehension of it.

The second type of craving is more subtle and often goes unnoticed. It's one which has a direct bearing on our meditation practice, and there are elements of this which have had a profound effect on my own understanding of the meditative process. This is what the Buddha called craving for becoming—the basic urge or desire to become this or that in our continued existence.

One very familiar pattern of this might be the obsessively planning mind. Have you ever been caught up in a mind that just endlessly, obsessively plans, imagining ourselves in some future situation and then thinking about how we get there and what we have to do and all the things involved in that? How often do we get lost in the mind creations of future self? So again, another interesting observation for you as you go through the day: keep just an eye out, or a general sense, of how much time the mind is lost in either past or future. It's a lot. Our minds just get caught up in this desire for becoming and then all the thought and emotion that goes with that. Being lost in these thought fantasies is desire for becoming.

But there is a way. Planning is a useful tool of the mind—this is not to suggest we should never plan. But there is a huge difference between planning while being grounded in the moment, knowing we're doing it, thinking it through and coming to the end of it, really being grounded in the present moment—there's a big difference between that and, as I'm sure you well know, being lost in the thought fantasies that just keep repeating themselves. Pay attention to that and really see it.

One of the most striking experiences of craving for becoming, very easy to observe, is the feeling of rushing.

What does rushing mean? What's that feeling like? We're all familiar with the feeling, but it's when we're ahead of ourselves. It's when the mind is already at its destination before we get there. We're already doing what we're aiming to do, but we're still here. And it's that toppling forward energy.

There's a famous line from James Joyce, from *Dubliners*, his collection of stories: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." That's us. A good part of the time we're living a short distance from our bodies. We're ahead of ourselves. So what is that? That's a kind of craving for becoming. It's like we're not settled back in the moment. It's wanting or craving, and it's creating a very unbalanced energetic system.

This is not insignificant, because this understanding of craving for becoming is intimately connected with the understanding of enlightenment, or freedom, or awakening. There's something right in this point that's very, very powerful. Because very often—in fact, probably most of the time—we forget that liberation or freedom is not about getting. It's not about becoming something. It's not about craving. It's not about holding on.

The very path we are on and what we're practicing—what is the essence of the practice? This is why I started the talk saying it's good to have an eye on the last step, because it informs how we take the first steps. When we understand that liberation is not about getting anything, that it's about letting go, that changes how we're doing our practice.

You're familiar with the experience when you're sitting—and it could be in the walking too, but I've noticed it a lot in my sitting meditation. What I'm going to be talking about now is really quite subtle, but I think obvious enough that you will recognize it. When we're sitting and we're just with our experience—the breath or sensations or whatever it is—and we're just there in a pretty easeful way, have you ever noticed just this very subtle tendency to be leaning into the next moment? It's like we're leaning into the process. We're with this in order for this. We're taking this breath in order for the next thing to arise. So it's that slight forward leaning that is craving for becoming.

A few years ago I was on self-retreat and I had a really vivid and in some way transformative experience of just this process. There's a line in the suttas, in the discourses, that's repeated quite frequently. It's a line that sometimes people will say as an expression of their awakening moment. And sometimes it's a line that when people hear it, they get enlightened: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Incredibly simple. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Whatever—which is everything. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

So I was sitting on retreat, and I had read that line a million times. Yeah, everything rises and passes—it just seemed like an obvious statement. But this particular time on retreat I was sitting, and for some reason that line came to my mind. But it's as if the line and the meaning of it dropped right into the process, the meditative process. So it was no longer on the intellectual level. It was like: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. It was being applied in that very moment to the flow of experience.

And then the conclusion became strikingly obvious right in this meditative process. If whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, therefore there's nothing to want. Because whatever it is that I might want meditatively—leaving aside all the external things—whatever I might want meditatively will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.

And in that moment, just—oh. I was seeing it so vividly. There's nothing to want. In that moment, I could feel the mind drop back from even that slight leaning into the next moment. It was like not wanting. And even though it was just for maybe a few moments, it was enough to actually recognize and taste

the quality or the experience of the mind free of craving. Because I could see the mind go from the lean to not wanting anything. And the experience of the mind not wanting—not the concept of it, but the actual experience of the mind free of wanting—was one of incredible peace and completion. There was nothing more to do for that moment.

And I saw that it really was, you could say, a glimpse of the third noble truth. The first is that there's suffering, or dukkha. The second is the cause, which is craving. The third noble truth is the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving. So we can get a taste of it, which is very real. It's not fabricated. And it may only last for a few moments. But as one Tibetan teacher would often instruct, practice it short moments many times.

So we don't have to necessarily be practicing with this idea, "Oh, maybe someday I'll get to the end of craving, but that's ten lifetimes away." No, we can practice the profundity of the end of craving for a moment, or a few moments, and actually taste it, actually experience what that is like.

This is a tremendous reorientation of our meditation practice. Because in some strange way, even though we may have heard all of these teachings, there's so much wanting that comes into the very meditation practice itself. We're sitting and wanting something.

This was really a significant shift in my understanding, even after all these years of practice. Forty-five years of practice. And this is one of the things that's so remarkable about the Dharma. We're always just at the forward edge of our understanding, wherever we are. We're at our own forward edge. And the Dharma is so vast, it just keeps opening. Very often, there can be these seemingly small insights that have a profound effect on our understanding of the path. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.

So maybe just as an experiment sometimes when you're sitting, just occasionally drop in the phrase: not wanting. Just that—not wanting. And see if there's any kind of release in the mind from that forward lean into the process. And then you'll get a sense of the relief, the ease, the peace.

In the early morning of the Buddha's enlightenment, it's said that at the first appearance of the morning star, when the Buddha realized full awakening, these words came to his mind: "Realized is the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving." It couldn't be more explicit. He's just telling us what the nature of the free mind is, what the nature of the mind at peace is. And again, we can touch it, we can taste it, we can experience it even briefly. Short moments many times. And it transforms our understanding—our understanding of our lives and all the choices we make, our understanding of the path and how we're practicing.

I found that these moments of really touching this and understanding this—mind not wanting, not craving, settling back into that openness—even those short moments can become a pole star, a sense of direction for us, so we really have a clear understanding of where we're going and what we're essentially doing in our practice. Because there are so many instructions and methodologies and things to do, but they're all in the service of not wanting. And we don't want to forget that.

I'll just close with a few lines from the Sufi poet Hafez: "Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets trying to find you."

I love that. The Dharma has heard our name, all of our names, and it's running through the streets trying to find us. So let ourselves be found.

CHAPTER 54

# Dukkha and Non-Self (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · 1h03

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein guides practitioners through the Buddha's second discourse, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), which led the five ascetics to full awakening. He illuminates the intimate relationship between dukkha and anattā (non-self), explaining how the afflictive and ungovernable nature of the body and mental phenomena reveals why they cannot be self. Goldstein unpacks the expanded meaning of dukkha—not merely suffering, but unreliability, ultimate unsatisfactoriness, and insecurity—showing how this understanding applies even to pleasant experiences.*
>
> *The talk offers practical ways to investigate non-self directly: observing how movement masks dukkha, reflecting on the five daily recollections about aging, illness, and death, and examining how superficial perception and identification with thoughts create the illusion of self. Goldstein uses the powerful image of thoughts as untethered clouds and self as a rainbow—a recognizable pattern arising from conditions rather than an independent entity. He references the Buddha's teaching to his son Rāhula: "This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."*
>
> *The teaching culminates in revealing how selflessness and love become one—when we realize the empty nature of phenomena, compassion arises uncontrived and effortless. As Goldstein notes, quoting Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, "Compassion is the activity of emptiness," showing how wisdom and compassion together become the two wings of awakened life.*

After the Buddha's enlightenment, he spent about seven weeks underneath the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya contemplating the profound realizations of his awakening. Then he wondered who might be receptive to these teachings, and he thought of the five ascetics with whom he had practiced for the previous six years, who were then living in Sarnath, a small village across the river from Benares.

After having spent seven weeks in and around the Bodhi tree, the Buddha set off on foot, and it's said it took him about six weeks to reach Sarnath. He gave his first teaching on the full moon of June. The name of that first discourse is called Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion—the first discourse expressing his awakened realization.

I find it inspiring to think of just the setting of this wheel of the Dharma in motion and realizing that this wheel has rolled across continents, across oceans, and somehow ended up in Woodacre. Here we are, really, as the result of that first discourse. It's pretty amazing.

He gave that talk and one of the five ascetics became a stream enterer, which is the first stage of awakening. Then the Buddha taught the whole group for a few more days and all the rest became stream enterers as well—which is the advantage of having the Buddha as your guide.

Then he gave his second discourse, which is called the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the discourse on the characteristic of non-self. Upon hearing this discourse, all five of these ascetics became fully enlightened, became arahants. So we're going to try and replicate that this evening. Listen carefully.

The teaching of non-self or no-self is really at the heart of the Buddha's realization. But unlike the truths of impermanence or the truths of suffering, of dukkha, which are easily understood even if we have not fully actualized these understandings in our lives—it's not hard to understand that things change and that things are ultimately unsatisfying—understanding the truth of non-self is really not obvious at all. It's almost counterintuitive. It runs counter to our everyday common sense understanding of who we are and how we live in the world.

Language, most languages, keeps reinforcing this with the "I" as the subject of most verbs. Language itself keeps reinforcing this sense that there's an "I" or a self as the subject of all experience, as the reference point for all experience. And yet it was precisely the teachings on non-self that led the five ascetics to full awakening, to full liberation.

Tonight I'd like to explore some elements of this discourse and to see how we can come to a deeper understanding, a more deeply felt understanding, of what non-self actually means and how we experience it, both in our practice and in our lives. As you listen to some of the words of the Buddha which I'll be reading—just some short excerpts from the discourse—please, if you can, listen as if you're hearing the words directly from the Buddha. You're not listening to it as a kind of philosophic description of reality. That's not what the Buddha was about. His teachings are all instructions. They're things for us to do in order to realize the truths he's talking about. See if you can let the teachings in in that way.

In reading from this discourse, there's one word which I will leave untranslated, and that's the word dukkha, which we've spoken about quite a bit this week. The Four Noble Truths all revolve around this one word: the truth of dukkha, the cause of dukkha, the

end of dukkha, and the path leading to the end of dukkha. It's really important we have a clear understanding of what this word means. The problem is that there's no one English word which captures the fullness of its meaning, and so it often leads to some confusion.

Dukkha is often translated as suffering—the truth of suffering. At times this translation is completely appropriate. We're all quite familiar with the pain and discomfort and suffering that can arise in this body and mind. Dukkha as suffering is something we can relate to and understand quite easily.

But then how do we reconcile the Buddha's very far-reaching declaration that all conditioned things—which means everything we experience—how do we reconcile dukkha as suffering with the statement that all conditioned things are dukkha? Because there are many experiences in our lives which are pleasurable and which we enjoy and which are agreeable and delightful. How does dukkha relate to those kinds of experiences?

Here words other than suffering will give a more complete sense of what dukkha means. We might translate dukkha in these contexts as unreliable, or ultimately unsatisfying, or insecure. We can experience the various pleasures of life, and we do, and at the same time have the understanding that these pleasures, which bring us a kind of happiness, are still dukkha in the sense that they are unreliable precisely because they're impermanent. We can understand them as being ultimately unsatisfying. Even though they satisfy us in the moment, we understand they're not going to last. That's the dukkha of even pleasurable experiences.

In listening to the discourse, you want to have this more expanded understanding of what dukkha means, so that you realize it does include every aspect of experience. All conditioned things are dukkha—even the pleasant, even the agreeable, even the things we enjoy—in the sense that they are ultimately unreliable.

This understanding of dukkha, I think, is not that hard to grasp. We all have experience of it. Yet it's precisely this understanding of dukkha that is intimately related to the realization of non-self. And that's what I want to begin the evening with—the relationship between understanding the unreliability, the dukkha, of all conditioned things, and how that helps us understand the teaching on non-self or no-self. Because it's precisely this relationship between dukkha and non-self, when we see it clearly, that opens the doorway to greater freedom.

So this is from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, just a small part of it. As most of you know, the discourses open classically with the phrase "Thus have I heard," because it's the Buddha's disciple Ānanda who was reciting the suttas after the Buddha's death from memory. "Thus have I heard," and then he repeats what he had heard from the Buddha.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was living near Benares, in the deer park at Sarnath, and there he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five—that is, these five ascetics.

Now this is just a little footnote. If you remember from the first night, I spoke of how bhikkhus is often translated as monastics—bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, monks and nuns. But in its more general meaning, it refers to everyone on the path. Right here in this first discourse, these five ascetics were not yet monks in the Buddha's order. He hadn't even really begun teaching yet, and yet he addressed them as bhikkhus. So when you hear bhikkhus, it's you.

"Bhikkhus." "Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this: "Bhikkhus, form—which means the body, the material elements, the physical elements—is non-self." In the sutta, they're using the word "form" as the translation of the Pali word rūpa, but I think it becomes more immediate if we focus on the particular meaning of the body, because then it's easier to relate these teachings to our own experience.

"Bhikkhus, the body is non-self. Were the body self, then this body would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine: let my body be like this, let my body not be like this. But because the body is non-self, it leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine: let my body be like this, let my body not be like this."

It's pretty simple, but with some profound implications. The Buddha is highlighting two aspects of dukkha here, and both of these aspects are going to relate to the realization of non-self.

The first aspect of dukkha the Buddha is highlighting is that the body, the physical elements, the material elements, lead to affliction. That's a pretty direct statement. The second aspect of dukkha is that the elements, this body, these physical elements, are ungovernable. They are not subject to our will. We can't say, "Oh, let my body be like this, let my body be like that." It doesn't work like that. The body is following its own natural laws.

We need to really look and investigate how these two aspects are at play in our lives. Because if you listen to this and it's just, "Oh yeah, this is the Buddhist take on things," it doesn't really have much transformative value. The transformation happens when we apply the words directly to our own experience and check it out. Is this true? Is it not true? How does it apply?

So the question could well arise: How does the body, how do the physical elements, lead to affliction? Is that true? It's actually not hard to see, even when we would rather not acknowledge it. We can understand the afflictive nature of the body, the afflictive nature of the physical elements, in some of the most ordinary of our daily activities. I think it was Ruth, or someone else who mentioned one of the other nights, the affliction of hunger and thirst. These are just common experiences in the body.

But we often don't reflect on these very ordinary experiences of being hungry or thirsty as an affliction of the body, because for most of us, these are easily remedied. We feel a little thirsty, we drink some water. We feel hungry, we take some food. For most of us, this is pretty available. And so we don't stop to pay attention to what's actually motivating us to take food or drink. What's motivating us is the feeling of suffering.

But because we can so easily address it, we don't generally stop to think of the body in those terms—that this is an affliction of the body requiring our attention.

For many millions, perhaps billions of people in the world, these remedies are not so easily available. I read that over a billion people don't have access to safe drinking water. A billion people. And perhaps that same number or more don't have access to adequate, healthy food. One article noted that in many developing countries, women have to walk over three miles to get water, carrying twenty-five pounds back to their village—just as a daily undertaking. For people for whom these basic necessities are not readily available, the hunger and thirst of the body is clearly seen as an affliction.

We can see the afflictive nature of the physical, material elements in natural disasters as well. We're all becoming increasingly aware of the great destructive power of the elements—the fires, the floods, the earthquakes. These are just physical elements, material elements doing their thing. It's simply nature. And yet we see the tremendous destructive power that can manifest. The looming, potentially disastrous consequences of climate change—it's just the physical elements at work. But there's a great afflictive power in the very nature of these elements.

There's also a very immediate way of touching this afflictive nature of the body. And probably, as you hear these words, you have some sense of just not wanting to hear them. All this talk of the afflictive nature of the body—is this what I came here for? But we have to overcome that resistance and really check in to see what's actually going on.

One very accessible place to see and experience this is in the simple necessity to change postures to relieve discomfort. Why do we ever move? You come in and sit down. Why not sit until you get enlightened? That's what the Bodhisattva reportedly did under the tree—he made this resolve: "I'm going to sit here until full awakening." Fortunately, it happened that night.

But what would it be like to come into the hall and think, "Okay, I'm in my seat. I'm not moving"? After some time, the body becomes very uncomfortable. It becomes painful. And we have to shift position to alleviate that pain. So then you stand up. Well, that seems more sustainable. Stand for a few hours—four hours, however long. At a certain point, standing too becomes painful, and you'll have to lie down.

I once made this experiment while practicing in India. I was so fed up with this affliction of body posture that I got a thick piece of foam and just lay flat on my back, completely supported, nothing crossed, nothing bent. I thought, "Great, I can just be here forever." It didn't take long until even in that position the body became uncomfortable. You have to roll over, move, stretch—whatever.

So there's a little tagline describing all this: movement masks dukkha. Movement obscures the suffering that the body is actually experiencing. Try this as an experiment. Just as you go through the day, if you remember, pay attention to why you move. Whenever you make a movement, what's motivating it? I think you'll find that for at least a good part of the time, we're moving to alleviate some discomfort.

This shows us so immediately what the Buddha is talking about in terms of the afflictive nature of the elements. It's not that it's bad. It's just how they are. This is the nature of the elements. What's interesting is that because we're not often paying attention to why we move, and because we move habitually, this masks dukkha. It gives us the illusion of thinking that we have some control over the elements.

You know, that this is me, this body is me, and I can control whether it's comfortable or uncomfortable—because we haven't really been paying attention to what it is that's causing us to move, to act. Movement masks dukkha. It's helpful to really look at that because it gives us a very immediate sense of the nature of these elements of the body.

But at some time or other, the second aspect of dukkha—not only the afflictive nature, but their ungovernable nature—becomes very obvious. The elements are ungovernable. So what does this mean?

Most likely, we'd all like to stay young and healthy, with a vigorous, active body that responds to what we'd like to do and fulfills our aspirations. But the body is not really obliging us in this way. Quite without our consent, it gets older. It gets sick. Different diseases or accidents occur. And then finally it dies. The elements of the body are ungovernable. It's like we don't have control over these things. It's not that it's chaotic—everything is happening lawfully. It's just that we haven't made the laws. They're following their own laws.

This is not hard to see, but are we paying attention to it? Are we really reflecting that this is the nature of the body and we don't have control over it? A big relief, if we can absorb this understanding, is recognizing that this process—this ungovernable process of the body and the physical elements—applies to all the mental aggregates as well. We're focusing on the body because it's a very tangible example, but you can think of the same afflictive, ungovernable nature applying to all of the mental activity too.

It's helpful to just remember that it's not a mistake. It's not that we're doing anything wrong. This is just how things are. This is the Dharma. This is the nature of these physical elements.

And so these are the words of the Buddha: "For this reason, the body is not self. If the body were self, we should be able to determine, 'Let it be like this, let it not be like that.' Bhikkhus, every form of the body, whether past, future, or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, must with right understanding be regarded thus. Any form of the body should be regarded thus: this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

We want to take that in. Why is it not I, not mine, not myself? Because the elements of the body lead to affliction and they're not governable. If we really were the owner of the body, we would command it to be always agreeable and pleasant. It's for this reason that the Buddha said this body—past, present, future—is not I, not mine, not myself.

So maybe we begin to get some glimmer of understanding of this. Then the question is: What's the response? What do we do with this? Even once we understand the non-self, dukkha nature, how do we relate? What's the proper response?

Again, the Buddha gave some very specific instructions: "Bhikkhus"—that's you—"whatever is not yours, the body, all the mental activity, whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

Right here we have to be a little careful, because the word "abandon" in English has all kinds of connotations. Abandoning in this context doesn't mean to ignore the body or the physical environment. It doesn't mean not taking care of the body or the physical environment. Rather, when the Buddha is saying abandon, he's really saying abandon the identification with it. Abandon the attachment to it. Abandon the hope that it will stay a certain way and a way that's to our liking. All of that is to be abandoned—the attachment, the clinging, the identification. When you have abandoned in this way, this will lead to your welfare and happiness.

So one of the problems with all this—and hopefully this is reasonably clear—

These are not esoteric truths. They're often overlooked truths, things that we're just not paying attention to, but they're not difficult to really see and check out in our own experience. The challenge for us is how do we fully realize this and actualize this in our lives, given how strongly conditioned the identification with the body is.

This is not an insignificant identification. Somebody comes up and says, "Who are you?" and this is who I am. It's so deeply conditioned, the sense of the body being self. So it takes some work. It takes some determined investigation, determined exploration to begin to break the power of this conditioning.

There's one collection of discourses in which the Buddha taught a series of reflections that can have a very powerful effect in cutting through—in helping to cut through—our attachment to the body, our identification with the body, our taking of the body to be self.

"Bhikkhus, there are these five themes which should often be reflected upon. What five? I am subject to old age. I am not exempt from old age. I am subject to illness. I am not exempt from illness. I am subject to death. I am not exempt from death. I must be parted from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me. I am the owner of my karma, the heir of my karma. I have karma as my origin, karma as my relative, karma as my resort. I will be the heir of whatever karma, good or bad, that I do."

Especially in the first few reflections, there's one phrase embedded that, for me, strikes at the core of our conditioning: I am subject to old age, to disease, to death—and I am not exempt.

I have noticed so often in myself that I can be going along feeling great and then something untoward happens and there's this surprise. I should be exempt. We think we are exempt until something happens. I don't think this is just me. So I would suggest that you look in yourself for whether we hold this unnoticed feeling that somehow

we're exempt—we go through life until life teaches us otherwise. We're just going through life thinking, "Yeah, this is for other people. Other people get old. Other people get sick."

This reflection—I find it really powerful. Often in life situations where something disagreeable happens, I'll use that phrase in my mind. It will come: "Oh, and I am not exempt." And it really makes things more easeful, because this is just the nature of things. This is how things are.

Frequently practicing these reflections can really become part of your daily practice. It's a very good thing to do because even though it's stating the obvious, it's not something we often keep in mind. The reflections are a way of keeping these understandings on the front burner of our lives, so that as we're going through all of the activities and the busyness and the engagement and all the craziness of our lives, there's that quiet place in which we realize: yes, I am subject to old age and I'm not exempt. Subject to illness, not exempt. Subject to dying, not exempt. It really keeps the flame of understanding alive in us.

Years ago I was teaching at Vallecitos in New Mexico, a wilderness retreat center for social and environmental activists. On the last day of the retreat, we were going for a hike and I had a little accident—I hyperextended my knee walking on some slippery rocks. I came back and was giving the talk that night, and in those years I was still sitting cross-legged. I had the thought, "Hmm, better not sit cross-legged." But I ignored the thought, sat cross-legged, and couldn't get up. After the hour-long talk, I had to be carried to my room, which was a little embarrassing, being carried out of the hall.

All night I was up with a kind of self-blame. Why wasn't I more careful? I had a really busy summer schedule of traveling. How am I going to manage this? I couldn't put any weight on my knee. And then, at a certain point in the midst of this mental turmoil, a little mantra arose in my mind—one I've found so helpful over all these years.

What came to my mind was just this very simple statement: anything can happen anytime. Just anything can happen anytime. This is simply the nature of impermanence and uncertainty and ungovernableness.

What was interesting for me about that phrase was that instead of engendering a certain kind of paranoia and fear—"Oh my God, anything can happen anytime!"—it was exactly the opposite. By accepting the truth of it, I could let down the defenses against it. So instead of living defensively, worried that anything could happen anytime, we

simply recognize that this is how things are. We can drop back into a place of ease, of openness, of acceptance. It made it so much easier. It really cut through all the self-judgment that had been arising in my mind.

In a similar recollection, the Buddha offered some other reflections which highlight the universality of these experiences. We tend, even when we do acknowledge them or are living through them, to collapse into personalizing them—sometimes with self-pity or self-judgment—as if we're the only ones going through this.

So these are other reflections from the Buddha: "Because what is subject to old age grows old, when this happens the instructed noble disciple reflects thus: I am not the only one for whom what is subject to old age grows old. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to illness grows ill. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to death dies. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to destruction is destroyed. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to loss is lost."

I find that enlarging. When we realize that these basic occurrences of life are common to all of us, when we reflect "I am not the only one, this is true of everyone," it universalizes our experience. We are all part of this great matrix of life and death, creation and destruction. That is what all life is about. It constitutes the very essence of what it means to be alive.

Through practice and reflection, we come to realize the aspect of non-self that is dukkha—its afflictive nature, its ungovernable nature, that things don't always follow our wishes and preferences. But we can also come to realize the aspect of non-self that is freeing. This is what's very interesting about anattā or selflessness. Part of it reflects the truth of dukkha: it's not self because of the affliction and the ungovernableness. But there's an aspect of non-self that is ultimately liberating. It's very helpful to see and be with this other side of anattā—namely, that not a single element of this mind or body belongs to us. Even though the elements are afflictive and ungovernable, which is the bad news, the good news is that they don't belong to us.

The Buddha gave a very direct example of this. He said: "Suppose, bhikkhus, people were to carry off the grass, the sticks, the branches and foliage in this grove of trees, or to burn them, or to do with them as they wish. Would you think, 'People are carrying us off, or burning us, or doing with us as they wish'?" "No, venerable sir, because that is neither ourself nor what belongs to ourself." If somebody were carrying off the branches and the grasses on this land, would you think they're carrying you off? No, it would not affect you in that way because they're clearly not self. "So too, bhikkhus, the

body is not yours. Feelings are not yours. Perceptions are not yours. Volitional formations are not yours. Consciousness is not yours. Abandon the attachment to them. When you have abandoned what is not yours, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

This is pretty radical. You're not going to hear this very often out there in the world. On a recent retreat, I was planning a talk for the teacher training program about emptiness of self and non-self, and in thinking about all this, the headline that arose in my mind was: "The Buddha wasn't kidding." This is so radical in terms of a different way of understanding what this mind-body is about, because all of our conditioning takes them to be self, to be who we are. The Buddha is pointing out that this is the basic delusion, the cause of all the suffering in our lives.

So then the question comes: given all these reminders and teachings—and the suttas are filled with them; these are just a very few short examples—given all these reminders of the impermanent, ungovernable nature of the physical elements of the body and all the mental elements, why is the sense of self, the view of self, the belief in self, the concept of self so strong in us?

If it's not true, if the self really isn't there in the first place, how is it that it is created, and how is it that we've gotten so enmeshed in this view?

There are many ways of explaining this, but one of the reasons that this view of self is so deeply embedded in the way we view things is because we rely on and are satisfied with very superficial perceptions. As we go through the world perceiving it, we're just skimming the surface. Get up in the morning, look in the mirror, recognize a certain appearance, and then create a concept designating that appearance. "Yep, that's me. That's Joseph. That's self." There's a superficial perception of an appearance, and right away, automatically—"that's me." We don't look more deeply into what is really there.

There are a few ways of looking more deeply. One, which some of you may have experience of: Have you ever stayed in a hotel, or maybe you have it at home, but I've seen them in hotels—these cosmetic magnifying mirrors? Have you ever made the mistake of looking in them? We look in the regular mirror, and yeah, it looks pretty good for however old one is. But then we look in one of these mirrors—oh my God! We're seeing on another level.

Going even deeper and more fundamental than that, when we really investigate what it is that we call the body, it's a collection of different systems. There's the skeletal system of all the bones. There's the circulatory system. There's the nervous system. There's the organs. Just all of these different systems which all together relate to something we call "the body."

But if we could really see the body for what it is, we probably wouldn't say, "Oh yeah, the gallbladder is me," or "The liver is me." No. But we just wrap it all up very nicely in skin. "Oh yeah, this is me." And we get attached to this body, and we get attached to other people's bodies. I wonder how attached we would be if we had x-ray vision and really saw what was underneath it all. And it's what is really there—it's not making it up, it's not imagining it. It's just that our perception is so superficial. Our perception is on the surface of things, and we don't take the time to say, "Okay, well, what really is this body? What is this body made of?"

The corollary of this attachment to the body is the fear of losing it—the fear of death, and the grief when people that we're close to die—all because of a misperception of what this body actually is.

On an even deeper level, and this is just something I read—you can check to see if it's really true—but I read someplace that on the cellular atomic level, the body is mostly empty space. And what this one article said anyway, and again, I can't guarantee its accuracy, but it was a very interesting point: it said that if all the matter of the body were condensed, it would be no larger than a speck of dust. That it's mostly empty space. So even if it's bigger than a speck of dust, it's still mostly empty space. So what is it that we're actually calling self? What are we claiming to be self here? Some specks of dust? Again, it takes really reflecting and looking and investigating and exploring so that we're not just skimming the surface of our perception.

So that's one way the sense of self arises, even though it's not actually there.

A strong sense of self also happens when we're lost in or identified with our thoughts and emotions. I'm sure you're very familiar with that experience now. How much of the day, even when we're practicing and trying to be aware and mindful—and often we are—but how much of the day are we caught up in and lost in the stories of our minds, the dramas of our minds? We identify with the thought: "I'm thinking, I'm feeling, I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm depressed, I'm bored, I'm excited." We're not seeing these mental activities for what they are. We're adding the "I" and "mine" to them.

And that's very habitual, and as I said earlier, our very language keeps reinforcing this—this is how we speak conventionally. I'm not suggesting we stop speaking this way, because it's conventional and it's useful. But are we going to get caught in the limitations of language, or are we going to use our practice to actually go underneath that?

We can begin to see that with thoughts arising, with different emotions arising, all of that also—just like the physical elements—arises when certain conditions are there. Conditions change, they disappear. The "I" and "mine" are extra.

There's an image found in some Tibetan teachings: thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds in the sky, having no roots, no home. I like that. Thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds in the sky—no roots, no home.

Then I visualize what we usually do with our thoughts and emotions. It's like imagining a cloud with a root coming down, tethering it to the earth. It would be ridiculous. The clouds are not tethered. But that's what we're doing. So you might imagine your mind like the sky and thoughts and emotions like clouds, and then just picture each of those thoughts with a little root coming down. That is the creation of the sense of self—that tethering. But in their nature, they are not tethered. No roots, no home.

The thoughts are the thinkers. The thoughts think themselves. It's not that there is someone behind them who's having them. The nature of thought is to think. Love loves—the nature of love is to love. Fear fears. Anger angers. The "I," the "mine," are extra. We're adding that to these experiences. But we're adding it so habitually that we don't even usually notice we're doing so.

This is the essence of our practice and what mindfulness means. We want to be mindful of all these phenomena, seeing them as they are. Vipassanā means seeing clearly. So we see a thought as a thought, untethered to anything, or an emotion. There's no one behind them to whom they're happening.

What we call self—and we use that term, and it's fine to use it on a conventional level—is simply the very rapid progression of all of these elements: the physical elements, thoughts, and emotions. They create patterns, recognizable patterns, so we can recognize each other as distinct individuals. The patterns are there. The problem is we reify the pattern into being a thing.

Here's an example. You go outside on a summer day after a storm, and you see a rainbow. It's beautiful, and we see the rainbow. But what is a rainbow? Is a rainbow a thing in itself? It appears that way. But when we examine more deeply, we see that the

rainbow is an appearance when certain conditions come together—light and water and moisture and air. These conditions come together, a rainbow appears. Conditions change, the rainbow disappears.

The water and the air and the light don't belong to the rainbow. The rainbow is an appearance arising from the conjunction of these elements. Self is like rainbow. With a rainbow, we see what we see—we see the rainbow, so it's not denying that level of it. But with a superficial perception, we reify the appearance into being some independent, existing thing. When we look more carefully, we see there is no rainbow apart from it being an appearance arising out of these conditions.

We relate to self on the conventional level. I'm not suggesting that we don't—just like with the rainbow, we see the rainbow. But if we're wise, we understand what it actually is. Through our practice, we can begin to understand self as being like a rainbow.

It's a pattern, a recognizable pattern of mental and physical elements working in a certain way together. But they don't belong to anyone. It's not that they belong to the self. That relationship of these elements is what we call self.

Are we together on this? Because this is so contrary to how the world understands things. And that's the brilliance and the enormous gift of the Buddhist teachings. You don't hear this very often. The Buddha had such a penetrating understanding of the cause of dukkha, of how we create this sense of self and then are imprisoned by it, and the way to be released from it.

I was conditioned very strongly by my teachers, my kalyāṇa-mittas, and my first teacher Munindraji. He was once here in California teaching at Sylvia Boorstein's house. A lot of people came and were listening to him. He began teaching at two in the afternoon and didn't stop until the last person left, which was ten at night. So I could go on for quite a while, but I won't.

In bringing this to some kind of conclusion, there was one Tibetan teacher who had a wonderful way of encapsulating the understandings of ways we do experience this as self and ways of realizing the selfless nature. This will be a bit of a paraphrase because I didn't bring the quote with me. Something like: "It's not that the self is not real. It is real. But it's not really real. You exaggerate it."

I love that. It is real on the conventional, relative level. It's real and we relate to it, and all of that is fine. But do we take the next step of realizing: yes, it's real, but it's not really real? That's the whole movement of our practice—to get underneath the appearance of things and to really see the true nature of what this mind and body is about.

And it's not about believing any of this. All of these words and all of the Buddha's words are an invitation for us to look for ourselves. That, for me—and as some of the other teachers mentioned—is what's so inspiring about these teachings. There's nothing we have to believe. It's just to look. And then we discover this for ourselves.

The Buddha gave a very simple and direct teaching to his son Rāhula about this, and I think we can use these words that he gave to his son as our own mantra of liberation. He said that every aspect of mind and body should be seen as it is with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

It would be interesting as you go through the day, as you feel caught by various things—sights or sounds or thoughts or emotions—whenever the mind feels contracted and caught up in selfing, maybe you could remember these words. See everything with perfect wisdom: this is not I, this is not mine, this is not myself.

And then something quite extraordinary happens. Because very surprisingly, through a deepening realization of selflessness, we develop a growing sense of connection. On the deepest level, we realize there is no one there to be separate. And on that level, selflessness and love become the same thing. It all comes together in the most beautiful way.

I'll close with some words from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was really one of the greatest of the Dzogchen masters of the last century. He said: "When you realize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

We could say that compassion is the activity of emptiness. Compassion is the activity of selflessness. And this is where, as Kamala was saying the other night, wisdom and compassion become the two wings of the Dharma. They become the two wings of our lives. We live in their expression.

Compassion is the activity of selflessness.

And this is where, as Kamala was saying the other night, wisdom and compassion become the two wings of the Dharma. They become the two wings of our lives. We're living in their expression.

Let's sit for just a few moments.

*

Thank you. And if you don't keep sitting until you're fully enlightened, please notice why you move.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 55

# Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h05

> *In this intimate Q&A session from a Forest Refuge retreat, Joseph Goldstein engages with practitioners on essential aspects of the path. He begins by discussing jhāna practice and the development of samādhi, emphasizing that strengthening concentration benefits both intensive retreat practice and daily life. Drawing from his own experience, he shares how intensive mettā practice first helped him develop meaningful concentration.*
>
> *The conversation explores interdependence (paṭicca samuppāda) as the understanding that all phenomena arise dependent on conditions, offering a doorway into understanding anattā (non-self). Joseph illuminates the conditioned relationship between thought and emotion, describing how watching this interplay can help depersonalize experience. He addresses the distinction between 'watching' and 'feeling' in meditation, recommending practitioners shift from observer language to feeling language for more effortless practice.*
>
> *Particularly profound is Joseph's teaching on delusion (moha), highlighting the moment of transition from being lost in thought to awakening as the clearest view of the difference between delusion and awareness. He concludes with a transformative practice drawn from the phrase 'whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away,' leading to the realization that 'there's nothing to want'—offering practitioners a direct taste of nirodha, the Third Noble Truth, accessible in any moment of practice.*

It's a pleasure to be with you all.

The question was about jhana practice—any observations or comments? Basically, the development or strengthening of concentration is always a good idea. There are very few people—maybe there are some, but very few—who have too much concentration. So I think for most of us, especially living as lay people in the world where there's so much distraction in our normal lives, to develop through periods of intensive practice a baseline of samadhi, and to strengthen that and keep it strong, carries over to some extent into our life outside of retreat.

For myself, over all these years, I've done periods where I felt this would be a good time to just emphasize the concentration aspect. And so I would take periods of time to do that. Sometimes there was a particular retreat, and a couple of times over all these

years I would decide, okay, for the next year I'm going to just devote myself—not all on retreat, but really emphasizing that aspect. It's always been useful, and it also feeds and supports the Vipassana practice.

In terms of jhana explicitly, as you may know, different teachers have some different interpretations of what jhana is. Rather than get into that, just understand that there are various interpretations of what that term refers to. But in all of them, it is the deepening of samadhi, of concentration.

Often people will come and ask, "Should I practice this way? Should I practice that way?" And it's interesting because it's all good. It's not that there's a right answer and a wrong answer. Over the course of our lifetime of practice, we need to do it all. We need to develop the insight and the samadhi and the metta and the compassion. All of it, over time, needs to be brought along. We each do that in different ways, and so I would suggest when there's an interest, when you really feel inspired—"I'm feeling the urge, the interest to strengthen the samadhi now"—let me do perhaps some form of jhana practice. At other times you might have the interest to really just practice more open awareness. It depends on where each of you is in your practice, knowing that it's all good, that it's worth doing.

Just one little addendum. When I first went to India, when I first started practicing, I had zero concentration. I would just sit and think for an hour and enjoy it. The hour went quickly and I was entertaining myself, but it was not really very helpful in terms of the meditation. When I went back the second time, I realized that I really needed to emphasize the concentration more. The way I did it was through intensive metta practice. We can develop concentration in a lot of different ways, whether it's on the breath or metta—there are forty traditional objects of concentration. But for me, the metta practice... I think I did at that time six weeks or two months of intensive metta, and it really made all the difference. It was the first time my mind had actually gotten a bit concentrated. I remember thinking to myself, "Oh, this is why people like to meditate." Because before that it had just been an ongoing struggle. But once the mind settled a bit, it gets a lot more easeful and a lot more is available to us. So I think at different times it's worth doing and finding the practice that really inspires you.

On the question of interdependence, different teachers may explain it differently. I have a very simple way of understanding it for myself—there may be much more elaborate descriptions than what I'm about to say. But for me, interdependence is simply the expression of the fact that all things are conditioned, that things don't exist independently. They arise because certain conditions are there which give rise to them appearing. So just by virtue of that, there is interdependence, because nothing exists in

and of itself independent of conditions. For me it's that simple—to see that whatever is arising, whether it's thoughts or sensations or the body or things in the world, everything is arising because of particular conditions which give rise to that.

One time the Buddha was having a conversation—I forget exactly what it was about, one of you probably will remember. Maybe it was about dependent origination, and Ananda was saying something like, "Oh, I understand this and this is so important, and I think I get it." And basically the Buddha said, "I don't think so."

This is very deep and very profound. So you can take my explanation in that context. But it seems to me a very straightforward way of understanding interdependence, rather than something outside the range of what we can really understand.

Just as a footnote to this, and here's where I think it gets quite interesting: not only can we understand interdependence—meaning that everything is dependent upon conditions—but it's really a doorway into understanding selflessness. There is no self which is independent of the arising of changing conditions.

The understanding of this would be very interesting to explore in your practice. Just keep an eye out for when, whether sitting or walking through the day, you have the strongest sense of "I am." Where are those moments of selfing that come up? Very often it's an identification with a thought. We're lost in a train of thought and there's really a sense of "I'm the one thinking, I'm the one in the story of it." Or the selfing could arise when we're having reactions to what's happening, and we become identified with the aversion or the grasping.

Just watch for those moments when that I-sense feels very strong or apparent to you, and then see that whatever is arising in that moment is also a conditioned phenomenon arising because of causes. It's not I, it's not self, it's impersonal. Given these causes, this arises. The conditions change, the experience changes. So we can learn from the times that we are caught in the sense of I. If we're paying attention, right in that moment we can practice freeing ourselves from that identification through understanding the conditioned nature of whatever is arising.

I hope you're having fun meditating, at least some of the time, because it's so interesting just to watch the mind and see everything it's doing—the skillful parts and the crazy parts. One of the things that amuses me about my mind, and I've just found it very interesting, is to see the conditioned interrelationship between thought and emotion. So often we get caught up in being identified with one or the other, with the thought or with the emotion or both.

At one point I was just sitting and watching my mind, and a certain thought came—I can't even remember exactly what it was, but I think it was about some difficult situation that had arisen. The thought came, and immediately following the thought, it conditioned the arising of an emotion. I don't remember exactly what the emotion was—maybe annoyance or irritation—whatever it was about the situation. I thought, "That's interesting. This is just a thought." A thought is so insubstantial, so empty, so nothing. And yet the thought comes and immediately it triggers the emotion. "What just happened?" It was such a striking experience to watch the conditioned nature of what arises, particularly with strong feelings.

So then I just started playing. I started intentionally calling up these thoughts to trigger an emotion, because I just wanted to see it happen again and again. And of course the opposite is true—sometimes emotions are there for whatever reason, and they trigger our whole train of thought. But when we see their conditioned nature, it helps us depersonalize them. It takes out the I. "Because of this, this arose. Because of this, this arose." It was interesting and fun to watch the mind with that level of specificity.

The grasping, I think, comes first. Grasping can take many forms. It can be the clinging at something, but it also can be the process of identification with something. That's a slightly different mental quality than grasping—it's basically wrong view, where we take something to be self. The thing is, even after the view of self has been uprooted, which happens at the first stage of awakening of stream entry, there are still lots of other defilements in which grasping is involved. So the craving or the grasping is really the key, or the identification with.

Just to clarify the way you framed the question—"which comes first, the grasping or the self?"—it's helpful to always keep the understanding that the self is not there in the first place. It's not something that exists. Rather, there is a felt sense of self in those moments when we're identifying with something. So I think it's helpful to come back to the process by which we feel there's a self, but not to be misled into thinking that there actually is such a thing, because then we really get mired in wrong view.

In the course of practice we just go through a lot of different perspectives. We'll have a lot of different experiences and perceptions of this mind and body as it moves through the process.

And in one way it could be an indication or an expression, to some degree, of the understanding of selflessness—some sense of the impersonality of it all. There's just this mind-body doing its thing, and so it can feel like that.

But I would be careful not to create the idea that this is how it should be, because sometimes we get a particular perspective and it may feel insightful in a certain way, and then we make that the goal of practice—to have our experience be like that. So I would be very careful of that and really trust the whole unfolding process. Sometimes you see it like this, sometimes it's like that. There will be a lot of different ways.

Just to mention—you're all experienced yogis, so I don't think you're falling into this trap so much—but I just want to reiterate something I do in most retreats. It's particularly for people learning the practice, but perhaps a reminder for you as well. In meditation jargon, we use a lot of watching language: watch, notice, observe. This can give rise to the sense of someone looking at whatever's happening, creating a kind of separation or duality.

What I've found helpful, just to counter that tendency, is to sometimes change the language from watching language to feeling language. This is particularly apparent in walking practice or just walking around. There's a big difference between the sense of observing the movement and feeling the movement. Observing it, it's as if we're from the outside, tracking it. Feeling it is from the inside, and it's much more effortless. You take a step and you're just feeling it, rather than taking a step and trying to hold onto it in the observation.

When I say observe, for me that feeling is more like—even if I'm not looking at it with my eyes—the sense of being up here watching, rather than being in the body feeling. You're probably doing this already, but I just wanted to highlight it. Particularly in the walking, that's a very good place to see if you notice the difference. Are you just feeling the movement, or is there a sense of observing it?

*Question: What's your opinion on meditation in the supine position? I understand it enhances relaxation, which enhances the ability to focus and concentrate, but it also can enhance the possibility of nodding off.*

Are you asking about occasional times of lying down, or because of some medical situation needing to do it most of the time?

*Response: No, to select a time when I feel very awake, maybe agitated. I feel there's no danger of getting dull or falling asleep, but it would enhance my ability to settle.*

And what's your experience? Does it do that?

*Response: Yes. It takes all the agitation, or if there's pain somewhere, it eliminates that and leaves me free.*

That sounds fine to me. Really, it's not about the position—it's about the mindfulness. That should be the measure. If you can be meditating in a lying position and staying wakeful and mindful, that seems fine to do. And you might try—maybe you already have—different lying positions, whether on your side or on your back, to see what works best to keep you most clear and wakeful. But sometimes giving the body that kind of rest and relaxation can really be helpful.

This is peripherally related, just a little something I noticed. I don't know how many of you are in the habit of taking a nap after lunch. So I was a big after-lunch napper on retreat. But I found something interesting that had to do with this relaxation. At a certain point, I would lie down after lunch, and you know that moment when you're resting and you can feel the body let go just before falling asleep? There's that moment where everything relaxes.

So what I noticed, even at that time when I felt I needed to sleep, actually I didn't—I needed the relaxation. And so I got into a habit at that time of as soon as I felt that moment of release, I would get up rather than take the nap.

And it was so interesting because it wasn't out of any guilt. It was just interesting to me to see, okay, what's actually needed here? And if sleep were needed, that would have been fine. But I found that it wasn't, at least for me then.

So these are the kinds of experiments we can make—just pushing at the edges a little bit and really seeing, as we get into different meditative habits, which ones serve us, which don't, and the ways of playing with them.

I think this is really important because it's very easy to get into the habit of a routine. We get really comfortable in that habit. And it can serve us because we establish a lot of good habits, but there are some which may not serve us. So sometimes we need to be poking at the habits of our practice. It might be sitting a little longer or walking a little longer or not having the eighth cup of tea or whatever it is. It's just to see what we do habitually and to play with that rather than simply be carried along by the habit.

With regard to that, different teachers will have different methods and systems. For me, I don't have a particular sequence—I'm just sitting and being with whatever is arising, and different experiences just fall into one or another of the four foundations. But other teachers really have a systematic way of going through them. And it's all good. It really is about what works best for you at a particular time.

Just on the body, there are lots of ways. Do you let it arise? Which one might you focus on? Do you start with the breath?

Many of you have probably heard me speak about this. In these last quite few years, I've introduced the beginning practice in a somewhat different way than I had been before, which had been really going to the breath and using that as the anchor and the primary, and then opening to other things. But in recent years, I've been using this phrase, which is a line from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: "There is a body."

Bhikkhu Anālayo had highlighted that phrase, and then I started experimenting with it. I found it very useful. So beginning with just that, and even using that phrase as a kind of mental note, where I would repeat the phrase not every moment, but intermittently: "There is a body."

This is just the sense or the awareness of the whole body. It's like the framework. And having that be the grounding element, staying open then to whatever arises within that frame. So there is a body, and then within that one might feel the breath in different places or feel different sensations or hear sounds. But instead of narrowing the mind onto those objects, in this particular way of practice, it's keeping the broader frame—there is a body—and simply letting these objects come and go within the frame.

I've personally found that very helpful, and I got a lot of feedback from yogis that it helped. Sometimes people can get a little too tight narrowing the focus on the breath. Not everybody, but it's not uncommon. And this is just a way of making a wider frame that allows the breath just to be however it is because one is not zeroing in on it.

So that could be one way. So much is experimentation. It's just playing and seeing what helps, what doesn't help.

**Yogi:** You gave the wonderful talk on Friday, and I wasn't aware of the designation of unworldly and worldly pleasures. In illustrating that distinction, you told the story of the Buddha. It wasn't some profound, transcendent state that the middle way was. So I was wondering if you could just elaborate on that.

**Joseph:** Well, I'm not really an expert in the historical development, but my impression is that in the India of his time, there was a lot of emphasis among the sadhus and yogis on the renunciation side and the self-mortification side. That was a very predominant part of the Indian spiritual culture at that time.

And so his big insight at that moment was, "Oh, there are certain pleasures that are not unskillful—the unworldly pleasant feelings that are actually skillful and onward-leading on the path."

And there are many examples of this that we have in our own lives. Certainly, at those times when the mind has settled into some level of concentration, there's an ease to that. It's a good experience where the practice can be very pleasant, but there's not a grasping there. It's a function of the concentration. Of course, one does want to watch to see if we get attached to that or not, but that's another whole issue. The pleasant feeling in concentration itself is a skillful, wholesome state.

But we can feel that same unworldly pleasant feeling in many of our worldly interactions. In those moments when you're being generous, how do you feel? There's a good feeling. Being generous, being kind, following the precepts, restraining from something that we see as unskillful—there's a good feeling that comes from that. And that pleasant feeling, we could say, is an unworldly pleasant feeling. So we have both mundane experiences of it and meditative experiences of it.

And likewise with the unworldly unpleasant, because we go through meditative stages where things are unpleasant—whether it's unpleasant physical sensations, or sometimes certain stages in practice where we're seeing the difficult side of impermanence. Everything is just falling away, there's no security, and it's not a pleasant experience. But it's actually deepening meditation. It's a deepening part of the practice. And at that time it's unpleasantness without aversion. And so it's an unpleasant, unworldly feeling.

It's just interesting to know that. This teaching came about because somebody once asked—I think they asked the Buddha directly, or it might have been one of the great nuns, I can't remember who the dialogue was with—whether pleasant always conditions greed, or unpleasant always conditions aversion. And so this was the point made: no, not always. There are pleasant and unpleasant experiences that don't condition unskillful things. It's helpful to know that and then to recognize it in one's own practice.

Speaking of whether feelings always condition certain responses, someone asked about the statement that wherever there is impermanence, there is suffering. That seems like a pretty absolutist proclamation. At the root level of experiencing, one might see that connection, but otherwise, it just seems puzzling.

I think the problem there is that the Buddha wasn't speaking English. Suffering as the translation for dukkha is limited. Sometimes it means suffering, but that word does not cover the full range. For example, when things change from being unpleasant to pleasant, we don't experience that as suffering—we experience that as relief. So we need to enlarge our understanding of what dukkha means.

If you understand dukkha as meaning unreliable, then we can see clearly its connection to impermanence. Whatever is impermanent is going to be unreliable. I think that's a more inclusive way of understanding that teaching.

This issue of translation comes up a lot in studying the dharma. I think it's a problem generally with translation. Just as another example, which is a common source of confusion: the English word "desire." In English, that word can mean many different things and reflect many different mind states. But because desire is the usual translation of tanhā, or craving, then people wonder, "Well, what about the desire for enlightenment, or the desire to be more compassionate?" But that's a different mind state, even though we're using the same word.

That's why, when there's some confusion, when things don't quite make sense in one translation, it's a good opportunity to do a little exploration of the Pali. What's the Pali word? Speaking to someone who really is an expert in the language about the Pali word and the meaning, and what are the connotations of it—that can often help illuminate the meaning.

Someone mentioned they weren't quite getting the point about striving. That's a good thing to explore. It's an interesting question for me as well, because on the surface of things, I'm not particularly a devotional type. Some people have a very strong feeling for devotion within them. It comes easily, that expression of devotion. My mind tends much more to the investigative side of things than the devotional side.

But that's just devotion on a certain level, because I am completely devoted to the Dharma. There's no question in my being about that.

So when I sit now, where I sit, I have this big, really big book that somebody gave me with a beautiful picture of the Buddha on the cover. It's just propped up against a bookcase. Before I start sitting, I do the refuges. And what I'm doing when I take refuge in the Buddha—I'll just back up a little bit. I adjusted the formula for the refuges slightly, but I think in a way that would meet his approval. I just add a few things, and it helps me with the very question you're asking.

So the way I take refuge is: I take refuge in the Buddha and the awakened mind. I take refuge in the Dharma and the noble path. I take refuge in the Sangha, in the community of enlightened beings. And may my practice be for the welfare and benefit of all.

What that does for me is give a little more specificity to what I'm actually taking refuge in. I'm highlighting a particular aspect in each one. So when I say I take refuge in the Buddha and the awakened mind, and I'm looking at this picture, it's almost like—of

course this is a projection—but I'm imagining the Buddha's awakened mind. I get whatever it is, an intuition or a glimpse or an idea of the Buddha's mind that's completely free of any identification with self. Completely open and fearless.

So then it's easy. That feeling of devotion to the Buddha comes not only or limited to the idea of him as a historical being, but to the nature of his mind that's so inspiring. That's how I cultivate that sense of devotion, even though it's not my strongest temperamental quality. You feel me?

I would just find your own way. For me, that really works—when I look at the Buddha and think of the expansiveness of that mind, especially relative to my own, I can feel a lot of devotion. That would be a good place to be.

In some way, we all have our own projections about the Buddha. But one way I like to think of it and relate it to my own practice is this: I think for all of us, we have a comfort zone in terms of experience that we're okay with. We can be with this much, and it's okay. We feel accepting of this. But then we get to the edge of our comfort zone, and it may have to do with physical discomfort, or it may have to do with certain difficult emotions, or some expectations about our practice. We get to the edge of our comfort zone, and often people get a little agitated there, or kind of struggle, or pull back—because we want to be more comfortable.

But being at the edge of the comfort zone is exactly where we want to be. That is the edge of our practice. And so if we can recognize that, then we can ask: can I relax a little bit into whatever that experience is? If it's physical pain, okay, can I just be with it? Or a difficult emotion—can I just be with it? And through our practice, our comfort zone gets a little bigger. Then we reach that edge, and it gets a little bigger and bigger.

And so my imagination of the Buddha's mind is that there are no edges. There's no edges. And if there are no edges, there's no fear. My imagination of his mind is just that mind of complete openness without any boundary of what's okay and what's not okay. This is just another way we explore our own relationship to the Buddha, and what our idea of the Buddha is, and what that means to us.

*Question from the audience about working with delusion, which can be more opaque than greed or aversion.*

Yes, I can speak to that, but I'm curious to know what your experience of the delusion is.

*The questioner describes their experience.*

Okay. There's one very simple, and for me tremendously illuminating, way of understanding delusion. There are many, many moments when you can experience this, and that is really watching—

that process of sitting with the breath or the body, whatever you're aware of, and then the mind gets carried away in a thought. At a certain moment, you wake up from being lost in the thought. Right in that moment, generally what people will do is either jump back to the object of meditation—the breath or the body—or they may precede that with a little judgment about having been lost.

Instead of either of those, I find it extremely interesting to highlight that moment of transition from having been lost to being awake. We're lost in the thought, lost, lost, lost, and then—always thinking—what just happened? Right in that moment. Being lost is delusion. We're not aware of what was going on. In the moment of waking up to the fact that we're thinking, we're already back in awareness. And if you highlight that moment, the contrast between delusion and wakefulness will be so vivid.

The next step then, really, and this could change your whole practice: instead of getting down on ourselves for all the times that we're lost, why not take delight in all those moments of waking up? In every moment that you come out of a thought—oh, the mind is awake again. Delight in that awareness of awareness. Because as many times as you get lost, that many times do you wake up. It's an equal number of times. So why not highlight the delight of waking rather than judge oneself for having been lost?

This brings a lot of delight and interest to the practice because first we're seeing that transition from one to the other, and we get a very clear view of what each is.

Another practice which I've done recently I found super helpful. I first did this in walking—not even in the slow walking meditation, but when I would be walking at a more normal speed, trying to be mindful. I started noticing the very quickly passing thoughts that come through the mind, thoughts that are not problematic, just light little thoughts that pass through—maybe it's a plan or a comment or a memory. I realized that because these thoughts are not particularly problematic, I was really not paying attention to them. They would just come and go.

Now I want to back up from that for a moment. Do you know the experience of when you wake up in the morning after a night's sleep, and you wake up and then maybe sometimes you drop back into sleep and perhaps a dream for a minute or two, and then maybe wake up again and then you're really awake? I had been noticing that, and then when I started watching these quickly passing thoughts, I saw it was exactly the same experience of falling back into the dream. Just a quick thought, but for the duration of

that thought—until I started doing this exercise—I was not aware. I was back in the dream of the thought. It might have been ten seconds or twenty seconds. Again, not dramatic, not problematic, but still asleep.

Then I noticed that a lot of these thoughts, even though they were very light, in one way or another were self-referential. Oh, I want to go here, I want to go there, or that would be a nice vacation, or a memory that I had. One way or another. So the phrase came to mind: I'm just dreaming myself into existence with all these quickly passing thoughts. I was unknowingly reinforcing some sense of self.

It became a very interesting practice for me and very illuminating because this is a practice we can carry throughout the day and throughout our lives outside of retreat if we get into the habit of just watching for these light, quick thoughts, seeing if we can maintain awareness in them and of them, and seeing how often we don't.

It's also very humbling, because we may think, "I'm pretty mindful. I've been practicing all these years. Not that I never get lost, but I'm pretty mindful." But when we're watching for these quick thoughts passing, we see how many times in a day we drop into that delusion. It can be quick, which is why we haven't particularly paid attention to it.

So that could be another way to explore this. But for me, the difference between being lost in a thought, however long or short, and being aware of the thinking is just the clearest view of delusion and wakefulness. It's so apparent.

It's a little sobering to realize that most of the world is in delusion most of the time. Which is why we're in the state that we're in. Here we are, devoted to mindfulness and wakefulness and awareness, and we see how often the mind slips into delusion. People without any intention or practice to be awake or aware are just living in that. That's the norm.

For me, understanding this really inspired a lot of energy to practice and be that attentive. And also, it's fun. It really is—just to be seeing our minds and everything they're doing.

The great blessing of our connection to the Dharma—and this is why in the refuge we say, "I take refuge in the Dharma, the Noble Path"—is that in the midst of all this delusion in the world and in the mind, there actually is a path. And through some incredibly good karma, blessings, and whatever mysterious causes, we are all on that path. We understand that path to some extent. This is a fantastic thing.

*A question was asked about how, as laypeople who come on retreat only occasionally, we might find optimism or hope regarding practice.*

This will be a good conclusion to the evening, because it involves another practice I've just started doing over these last few years, and it's really had a tremendous impact.

A couple of years ago, I was on a self-retreat. There's a line in the suttas that appears frequently, and I'm sure you're all familiar with it: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Sometimes in the suttas, just hearing this, people get enlightened. Sometimes this line is the expression of somebody's enlightenment experience. It has profound meaning.

But I had read that statement for forty-five years of my practice, and it just seemed like an obvious statement of impermanence. I never really gave it any more thought. Yes, whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Everything changes.

Then on this self-retreat, I was just sitting, and for whatever reason, right in the midst of a sitting, this line came to mind. Because my mind was fairly still, it's as if that phrase—"whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away"—instead of being up here somewhere conceptual, the meaning of it dropped into the very process that was unfolding. Have you ever sensed this? The meaning just became very vivid experientially in that moment, because I was sitting in that process of watching things come and go, just the flow of impermanence. On this moment-to-moment level, "whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away" became so vividly clear.

Then my mind went to the conclusion of that. This was all within a minute or so. It came intuitively—it wasn't like I was particularly proliferating or thinking it through. So I was in that process, things just flowing along. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.

Particularly on this meditative level, this moment-to-moment level—because whatever I want in the practice will also pass away. Understanding that, there's nothing to want. And in that moment, when that thought came, I could feel my mind drop back from the very common tendency we have of leaning into the next moment. We're with this in order for that. We're with the breath in order to deepen our concentration. We're with the pain in order for it to morph into something else. There's always that—not always, but often—this leaning. It's almost energetic. Do you ever sense what I mean? Just leaning into the next moment as if somehow the next moment will resolve everything this moment hasn't.

But then with this understanding—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—I realized there's nothing to want, because whatever I'm leaning into will also just pass away. In that moment of nothing to want, I could feel the mind drop back from the leaning. It really dropped back into, just for a few moments, a deep not wanting.

This was both very simple and quite profound for me, because it highlighted what our practice is actually about. Really what we're doing is practicing not wanting. The practice is not, at its essence, about gaining experience. There's nothing to want because what we're practicing is not wanting.

And in that moment, I could really feel: this is a taste of the Third Noble Truth. There's dukkha, the cause of dukkha which is craving, and the end of dukkha which is the end of craving—the end of wanting. Even if it's just for a few moments, I could taste the peace, the profound peace of the mind not wanting. It has a very unique flavor, unlike anything in the process that's arising and passing away.

I'm not suggesting these moments constitute great enlightenment experiences, but they offer a taste—a genuine taste of what's possible.

The Buddha's great enlightenment song, that famous verse supposedly arising in his mind at the moment of awakening, addresses the house builder: "House builder, you have now been seen. You will build no house again"—the house of self. And the conclusion of that verse declares: "Realized is the unconditioned, achieved is the end of craving."

He states so explicitly that this is what we're practicing: the end of craving, the end of that wanting or leaning into experience.

Previously, I had always placed the Third Noble Truth and the end of craving as some far-off goal—perhaps in some lifetime I'll arrive there. But through this experience, I realized that this is something we can practice now, in this very moment. Even if it's only for a moment.

I've been using this little phrase frequently in my practice now: "There's nothing to want," or simply "not wanting"—something that reminds me what the practice actually is. It's not about getting something.

There is a way to practice this in a very meaningful and profound way because it genuinely gives us a taste of liberation. And the more we cultivate that taste in formal practice, the more we may remember it in worldly situations where desires are running amok. If we can remind ourselves, at least at times, "There's nothing to want."

If you're interested, you might play with this, because I found it extremely helpful given our tendency to lean into the next moment—which is itself a kind of wanting, a kind of craving. It's craving for becoming: become this, become this, become this.

Nothing to want.

It's amazingly simple, and as I've said, for me it felt as though there's something genuinely profound in that recognition, because it reorients how we're practicing entirely.

You can play with it.

CHAPTER 56

# Online Fundraising Event for Gaia House, with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · 1h28

> *In this special fundraising event for Gaia House, Joseph Goldstein addresses how we can use meditative understanding to navigate the unprecedented challenges of our times—from pandemic anxiety to political stress. He offers five practical strategies for working with difficult emotions: accepting that it's okay to feel unpleasant experiences, understanding the difference between recognition and true mindfulness, and investigating how thoughts condition emotions.*
>
> *Goldstein shares the memorable Zen story of the monk who painted a tiger so realistically he became frightened of it, illustrating how we often react to 'painted tigers'—thoughts about situations rather than actual present-moment experiences. He emphasizes the value of concentration practice for developing mental stability, the skillful use of 'changing channels' when overwhelmed, and remembering the impermanent nature of all emotional states.*
>
> *Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Goldstein guides a brief meditation using the phrase 'there is a body' as an anchor. He explores how suffering can become 'grist for our practice'—an opportunity for investigation rather than something to resist. The talk addresses questions about compassionate action without attachment to results, working with sorrow and news addiction, and maintaining equilibrium in challenging relationships. Throughout, Goldstein returns to simple yet profound reminders: 'It's okay' as a mantra for acceptance, kindness as the foundation of skillful relationships, and curiosity about our own suffering as a doorway to freedom.*

So it's great to be with you all. We would start with just a short meditation as a way of settling in, getting centered a little bit. We'll sit for about ten minutes.

Take a comfortable posture. Take a meditative posture, some posture that keeps you reasonably alert. As I'm sure many of you know, usually in this tradition we sit with the eyes closed, but of course it's also possible to sit with eyes open, looking generally downcast if that's what you're used to.

Settling in, taking a few deep breaths just as a way of settling into the body, becoming aware of the body, the body posture. Sit and know you're sitting.

A phrase that I found helpful to repeat occasionally as a reminder is the phrase that comes from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It's just the simple phrase: there is a body. I found using that phrase is a helpful reminder to simply settle into the awareness of the whole body. There is a body.

And as you're sitting within that framework—there is a body—you may become aware of the body breathing. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. It's that simple.

Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise, but an exercise in awareness. We can simply let the breath find its own natural rhythm. It doesn't have to be any particular way. We're simply mindful of the sensations, the feelings of each breath as it presents itself.

Within the framework of there is a body, you may become aware of other bodily sensations that call your attention. You can open to the feeling of those sensations, feeling them, noticing how they change, and returning to the awareness of the whole body and the body breathing.

Stay alert for the arising of any thoughts or images in the mind. As soon as you become aware that the mind is thinking, it might be helpful to make just a soft mental acknowledgement—thinking, or seeing if it's an image—as a way of supporting the mindfulness of the thinking process.

Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

Open to any predominant sensations that may be calling your attention. Opening to the sensations, feeling them, noticing their changing nature. And again, coming back and settling into the awareness of the body and the body breathing.

Be aware of thoughts or images as they appear in the mind. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. And when you're ready, you can gently open your eyes. Be aware of seeing, just connecting with the world around you.

This afternoon, here in Barre, Massachusetts, I'd like to talk about different ways we can use our meditative understanding of our minds in dealing with some pretty unprecedented challenges that we all face in these times. There's so much going on in the world. Of course, there's the worldwide pandemic, which is having huge consequences for so many people's lives. There's all the stress of the political arena, certainly here in the States with this last election, and I imagine each place that you're living has its own

political stresses. These circumstances can create all kinds of difficult feelings and emotions in our lives—perhaps fear because of the uncertainty of what's going to happen, or anxiety, or sometimes anger. Lots of different things can be coming up.

So I wanted to talk about four or five ways we can relate to our mind states in a way that helps us navigate these difficult emotions that may be arising and that we may be getting caught in—navigate them and actually have them be a source of greater insight into our own minds, really making them part of our path towards liberation. I'll mention four or five different strategies that I've been experimenting with and exploring myself in these times, because I think all of us in one way or another have been subject to the stresses of what is going on now.

There are a few basic principles that we can really apply in this situation. The first is looking to see what our relationship is to perhaps painful emotions that are arising—whether fear is arising, or anxiety, or sadness, or grief, whatever it may be. The first step in the meditative process, in seeing how we can work with these emotions in a way that leads to freedom, is to get okay with feeling them, to recognize that it's okay to feel them.

But this is often not our first response, because many of these emotions are painful and they're a source of suffering. Our first reaction might not be, "Oh good, let me open to this." Often there is resistance or aversion or contraction. It doesn't feel good when we're feeling anxiety or fear. So we need to remind ourselves that mindfulness means acceptance of the fact that they're there.

This points to quite a radical statement of the Buddha, which has always inspired me a great deal. It's very striking. He said that as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. I find that a very strong statement, because for most of us, we're very deeply conditioned to want and be attached to what's pleasant—we want more of it—and to have aversion or resistance to the unpleasant, pushing it away. This is really, one might say, almost the normal way of being in the world. We go for what's pleasant and we try to avoid what's unpleasant. The Buddha is pointing out here that this conditioned reaction, this conditioned response, just keeps us locked into patterns of suffering.

So there's a very strong instruction that we need to be mindful of pleasant and unpleasant feeling, which is, as many of you probably know, the second of the four foundations of mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, then mindfulness of feeling—and feeling here means pleasantness or unpleasantness. The first step, if we are experiencing

unpleasant emotions in response to either what's happening in the world outside or in our own individual lives, is to remind oneself: it's okay to feel this. Let me open to it. Let me feel it.

Here we can begin to see the difference between the mindful experience of something unpleasant and aversion. We can experience unpleasantness—whether it's a physical sensation in the body or an unpleasant emotion—but if we're mindful, we are actually opening to the mindful experience of unpleasantness without reactivity. This takes some training, this takes some practice, because as I said, it may not be our first reaction to some painful experience. But it's okay. It's okay to feel it.

There's another point here which is related and which was very revealing for me in my own practice: understanding the difference between recognition and mindfulness. Often people conflate the two. We think that if we recognize what's present, it means that we're being mindful. But recognition and mindfulness are two really quite different things. We can recognize what's present through a filter of wanting or aversion or delusion. We recognize what's there—"Oh, yes, this is anxiety"—

This is fear. But we can be pushing against it or contracting in the face of it. So even though we're recognizing, we're not actually being mindful.

It's important to build on the recognition. We need to recognize what's there and then take the next step. Can I be with this without reactivity? Can I be open to it? Can I be with the unpleasantness with equanimity?

This is an important instruction, not only for these times of stress in the world, but for the whole unfolding of our meditation practice leading all the way to enlightenment, to awakening. Mindfulness of the unpleasant—it's okay. We can feel it. We can come close to it. And in that mindfulness, the mind is actually in a place of rest, of ease.

This is really important to examine, because as I say, the initial conditioned reaction will probably not be that quality of acceptance. Something painful comes and there's just this very strong conditioning not to like it, not to want it. So mindfulness of the unpleasant, and particularly of unpleasant emotions, painful emotions. It's really analogous to the same way we would be with the experience of pain in the body. As most of you know, most of you are probably experienced meditators, so you know that a lot of the practice is settling into the awareness of physical discomfort and it's okay. We can be mindful of that in an equanimous way.

There's another very interesting investigation we can make with regard to different emotions, particularly difficult emotions that may be arising in challenging times. And that is to see the relationship or the conditionality of thought and emotion. I found this

to be extremely interesting, just watching in my mind how a thought can appear—maybe it's a thought about the pandemic or a thought about a certain situation in our lives or even thoughts of different people. A thought can appear in the mind and quickly, almost immediately, that thought can trigger, can condition an emotion.

And it may be about something that is not actually happening in the moment. Rather, it's a thought about something. It may be a thought about a larger present circumstance, or a thought about something that happened in the past, or a thought about what might happen in the future. These kinds of thoughts arise, and it's very interesting to watch how thought appears and, often very quickly, there is an emotional response to that thought. I found it extremely interesting just to watch this play of thought conditioning emotion.

It works the opposite direction as well. Emotions can condition the arising of more thoughts, and so we stay in this loop. It's very helpful to be mindful of this process. If we can be mindful of the thought as a thought—the thought is not the actual situation, the thought is something arising in our own mind—if we can see it just as a thought, then even if it does trigger an emotion, which it might, but if we're mindful of that whole process, we're no longer so caught up or identified with the emotion. We begin to see it really as just this impersonal process going on. Thought arises, conditions emotion, but we're in that place of awareness, of mindfulness, watching the process and even taking interest in it.

So mindfulness of thought and how thoughts condition emotion is tremendously helpful. This takes some practice, because as I'm sure most of you know, thoughts are very slippery. We can be sitting open to the body, feeling the breath, and thoughts seem to just slide in. They don't have as much impact, as much tangible contact, as even a sound or certainly a sensation. They kind of slide in, and very often we're not aware for some time that we're even thinking.

Part of our practice is to set the intention—even as we're being mindful of the body and being mindful of the breath and sensations—to set the intention to stay alert for the arising of thought in the mind or the arising of image. We set that intention and it will help us perhaps become aware of them more quickly.

There's one Zen story which I really like, and it has tremendous implication for what I've been talking about. It seems there was this old Zen monk living up in a cave in the mountains of Japan. He was a great artist, and for some reason or other, he spent his time in the cave painting a tiger on the wall of the cave. He was such a brilliant artist, and the story goes that he spent a couple of years creating this painting.

And he did it with such skill, so realistic, that when he finally finished and looked at it, he got frightened.

We can perhaps smile at the ridiculousness of that—getting frightened at a painting on the wall of a cave. But actually, we do the same thing. Every time we are reacting to a thought in the mind about something that is not actually happening in the moment, that thought is like a painted tiger. We may have a thought about something that's going to arise in the future, or something that happened in the past. It's not actually happening now. We're simply having a thought about it, but we're not aware of it as a thought. We take it to be real in a certain way, and then we have these big emotional responses to that thought. We are responding like that monk looking at the painting—he looked at the painted tiger and got frightened.

Now, it is helpful to distinguish between painted tigers and real tigers. It is possible he went outside of his cave and maybe there was a tiger, and he needed to take some response. So there are actual situations in our lives that need response, and we need to be aware of that. However, I would guess that the vast majority of times our minds are being reactive to one thing or another, they are really being reactive to painted tigers—these painted tigers in our minds.

It might be interesting for you to even use that as a soft mental note, a little mental label. If you're sitting or just going through your day, in the course of your daily life, and you feel like you're getting caught up in some unskillful mind state or emotion—whether it's worry or anxiety or fear or whatever it might be—then see: what is the thought that triggered that emotion? Is it actually a situation, an experience that is happening right now? Or is it simply a thought in the mind about something that either did happen or might happen, but is not happening in the moment? Then you might even make that little note: "painted tiger." It helps to free the mind from entanglement in this thought-emotion mutual conditioning, the one with the other.

I found this really helpful because, with so much going on in the world and how that affects all the experiences of our own individual personal lives, there's so much arising within us. We need to really develop some discernment about what's a real tiger, what's a painted tiger, what's the appropriate response. Is it helpful just to see it as a thought and let it go? If it triggers an emotion, can we be open to it even if it's unpleasant? Not only recognizing it, but being mindful—meaning non-reactive. It's okay to feel it, whatever it is: the anxiety or the fear or the uncertainty or the doubt or the worry. It's okay. "It's okay" has become one of my favorite mantras.

So, one approach is opening to the unpleasantness. Another is seeing the relationship of thought and emotion, and discerning what really needs responding to and what doesn't—what is simply a thought in the mind, recognizing that as such.

There will be times when we may do all of this, but still we're caught. For whatever reason, we're really in some kind of distress—emotional distress that sometimes translates into physical distress. Sometimes we may just be caught in this kind of storm in the mind. Something else that is very helpful to remember is that we can change the channels. If we are just immersed in the worry channel or the fear channel, and we try doing all these things—we try being mindful, we try opening—but for whatever reason at that particular time we don't have the capacity to extricate ourselves from the identification with it all, and so we're caught in some way, it's possible to change the channels in the mind.

Sometimes I think of the mind as just like watching TV, and with mindfulness it's like we're holding the remote. If we're on a worry channel or a fear channel, click the remote—how about going to a metta channel? Just starting to do some metta meditation. Or a compassion channel. We're taking the mind from a place of suffering, from a suffering channel, to a channel of greater ease.

This is very helpful to do because once we have established a little more spaciousness within ourselves from having changed the channels—giving ourselves a little rest, a little respite from whatever storm was going on in the mind—we find some rest, we find some ease in a more skillful mind state, a more skillful channel. Then, after some time, we may feel that we have the inner strength or the inner resilience to open up again directly to the difficult emotion, or open up to the train of thoughts going through our minds without the reactivity, without getting lost in them.

Don't underestimate the value of this ability to actually choose what channel of the mind we want to be on. It's really a great strength.

So there's opening, being mindful of the unpleasantness—but it's okay to feel unpleasantness. This is part of our practice of really investigating and taking an interest in how thoughts condition emotion. As I said, I find it super interesting that we do this. Sometimes I might be sitting, and I'll have a thought about somebody—either someone I have a lot of love for, or someone I have some difficulty with.

And I'm just sitting there meditating, more or less trying to be mindful, and this thought comes—the person is not there. But just the thought of the person can trigger an emotion, one way or another. Painted tiger. We really want to practice this so we don't continually get caught. Changing channels.

There's one other aspect of being with thought that I want to mention, something I found tremendously liberating and interesting. When we're caught up in a long, elaborate thought process, we may try to be mindful, but somehow we're still hooked—we're being carried along. A very interesting question to ask, which very few people ever ask in their lives, is: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is the thought as a phenomenon?

At those times when we're having a whole train of thoughts, this is actually an easy time to investigate, because the thoughts are already there. If we can remember, even in the midst of it, to step back and ask the question—what is a thought?—it's super interesting. When we look directly at the nature of thought, we see that it's really little more than nothing. It's so insubstantial, and in a way, transparent. It's just this little energy blip arising in the mind. But we get seduced into a relationship with the content, and we miss the essentially empty nature of thought itself.

This is hugely helpful, because unnoticed thoughts—which are most of them in our lives—have tremendous power to condition and influence our lives. I call them the little dictators of the mind. The thoughts come: go here, go there, do this, do that. And we're just kind of the slaves of our thoughts. Yet when we become mindful and really look at what a thought is, we see that it's little more than nothing.

Once we understand this, it opens up a place of tremendous freedom. We're not so caught or imprisoned by this ongoing stream of thoughts that happen throughout the day. It provides space for discernment. When we have that understanding—that thoughts in their nature are empty, insubstantial, that in and of themselves they have no power—we recognize that the only power thoughts have is the power we give them.

When we have this understanding increasingly through practice, it opens up the possibility for real discernment about which thoughts we should act on and which thoughts we should simply let go, let pass through. This doesn't imply inaction. Rather, it leads to a tremendous state of resilience and pliability of mind. It's another way we can work with the kinds of thoughts that may be arising during these times, but also in more ordinary times as well, because the same process is going on.

There are two more suggestions for how we can work with our minds in these times. The first is something the Buddha talked a lot about in the discourses: appreciating the value of concentration. Actually taking time to really develop the strength of concentration. This is a capacity of the mind, and regardless of where we're starting from, it can be developed.

I know this because when I started my practice, I had almost zero concentration. When I was at university, I studied philosophy. Afterwards, I went to the Peace Corps in Thailand, and then I was in India practicing for quite a while. When I first started, my mind was just thinking all the time—and enjoying it. The hour went quickly; I was entertaining myself. But there was almost no concentration.

It took me quite a while, and various practices, to develop some degree of concentration—enough that I could then really begin to use my mind in skillful ways, to truly investigate the nature of what was happening. For me, one of the ways of developing concentration that was quite effective in those early years was a six or seven week metta retreat, just doing loving-kindness, which is its own concentration practice. That was really the first time—after spending quite a long time having tried to just be mindful in vipassana mode, with my mind wandering a lot—that I did a sustained period of concentration practice. The mind developed enough strength and steadiness and stability to then re-engage with the insight practice on a whole different level.

There are many ways of developing concentration. You might find the approach that appeals to you or inspires you. It could be working with the breath. It could be working with metta. There are many different objects of concentration one could explore. It's said traditionally that concentration suppresses the defilements, which means that for that period of time when the mind is concentrated, the defilements are not operative.

Now, often we hear the word "suppress the defilements," and we think, "Well, I don't want to do that. Suppression is not a good thing." But this is not the unskillful kind of suppression. This is actually the suppression of simply putting unskillful states aside for a period of time in order to develop the strength of mind to then engage with them more skillfully. So actually, this putting aside of the defilements through the power of some degree of concentration can be a really skillful thing to do.

The last approach that I'd like to suggest in working with whatever challenges are coming up during these times—and for some, they may be quite extreme, but I think for almost everybody, there's just a general feeling of tremendous uncertainty and difficulty with what's going on these days—is this: as different difficult emotions might get triggered and we find ourselves caught up in them, even after we may have tried some of the things I suggested, it's very helpful to remember, and to remember often, that whatever it is that's arising in the mind and the heart is impermanent.

Often when there's a strong emotion conditioned by powerful forces, either within ourselves or in the world outside, and it triggers some strong emotional response, a common tendency is to have the feeling that this is going to be here forever. It just feels like we're so in it, so immersed in it. And even though rationally we know that it's not,

emotionally we have that feeling—if not the rest of my life, at least the rest of the week or the rest of the month. We forget or we don't remind ourselves that however strong the emotion might be, it is impermanent. It is not there all the time.

Even during a period of time where it may recur—maybe things are happening in your lives and the worry comes back again and again, or the anxiety comes back again and again—that doesn't mean that it's there all the time. Those emotions are there, and they're there for some time, and then we have other experiences, lots of other experiences that may be even neutral or even pleasant. And then perhaps the worry or anxiety comes back.

So both to remind ourselves of the impermanence, but in a way even more important, is to actually see the impermanence—to be paying careful enough attention. Even if we feel ourselves caught in what's happening, to be watchful enough so that we're in it and we're trying to be mindful. Maybe we are to some extent, but then lost. But if we keep really paying attention as best we can, we will see that at a certain point we're having a completely different experience. Maybe we're just out for a walk and enjoying nature, or maybe the mind goes just to the breath or being with the body, or we have other kinds of thoughts and emotions arising. It's all a flow of change.

This is so helpful to remember because it helps us really maintain a kind of balance and ease with the flow of changing phenomena.

So these are some of the different strategies that I've used during these times because, like many of you, it's impossible not to be affected by what's going on in the world. We all are. But our practice is to learn how to be with whatever our experiences might be, to really use it as the grist for our practice. We can learn. We can actually make it all part of the path and part of understanding the nature of suffering and the possibility of freedom right in the midst of the challenges, right in the midst of the difficulties.

It's like if the mind is suffering, can it pique your interest? What's going on here? How am I relating to what's happening that's causing the suffering? And so it becomes a very useful opportunity to really deepen our practice and our understanding.

I hope that some of these suggestions may be of help to you.

So just as an example, the other day a friend told me about some people who live near Barre in very difficult circumstances—they don't even have enough money for heat, and winter is coming. She's working hard to try to help this group of people. As

she was telling me this, I so internalized that thought: "Well, how can I help?" And spontaneously, the response arose: "Oh, I can help out with just an offer of some generosity for these people who are local, who are right here, who need the help. What can I do?"

I think there's an immediacy and a simplicity if we hold it in that way, rather than trying to take on the whole big issue and then figuring out, "Oh my God, what could I ever do?"

So there's another piece to this. The first is just the simplicity of asking that question right in this situation: How can I help? Is there something I can do or not? And recognizing that sometimes there isn't.

The second piece—and this is a general principle with a lot of application here—is to act without attachment to the result, without expectation for the result, because so many different conditions influence how things are going to work out. We just have one small part of the whole big picture. We can do what we do and try to help in whatever way we can. But if we have an expectation for it to turn out a certain way, that is the setup for suffering, because it's outside of our control.

This applies a lot to our meditation practice as well. How often do we bring expectation to our meditation? We sit down with some expectation that we want it to be a certain way, and then it's not, and we get involved in all kinds of suffering because of that. Freeing the mind from that attachment to result is just tremendously helpful—which doesn't mean not doing things. We do respond in whatever way seems appropriate, but without that attachment. And I think you would find a lot greater ease then, and a lot more energy to continue to help, because you're not getting discouraged if the result is not exactly what you wanted it to be. It's quite workable, and it would be very interesting to explore these possibilities.

*Question: What if the emotion is sorrow—particularly sorrow on behalf of the many people who suffer in the world, like people in refugee camps? What if it's not a painted tiger? What if it's real? And relatedly, how do we break the habit of news addiction? How do we relate to the suffering world?*

In response to the first question, I think it points to really the first point I mentioned. Sorrow—it's not surprising that sorrow may be coming up, given what's happening in the world. And in a way it reflects a kind of open-heartedness, that we're actually letting it in and having that kind of response.

Then the question is: how are we relating to the sorrow? Are we drowning in it? Are we being overwhelmed by it? Or can we open to the feeling? We settle into the heart, mind, and body of it all and feel: "Oh, sorrow feels like this. This is what sorrow is

about." But that's very different than being lost in it. It's almost like we're open to the feeling of it—we're really taking it in and feeling it, but we're relating in a way where we're not drowning, not being overwhelmed.

And then the sorrow could be the condition for compassion to arise. The cause for compassion to arise is a willingness to come close to suffering. If we're closed off to suffering, then the wellspring of compassion is going to be blocked. It's only in our ability, our willingness to come close to suffering—either within ourselves or in the world—that becomes the prompt for compassion arising, and that sense of "Okay, well, how can I help?"

The feeling of sorrow, if we're relating to it in an open, mindful, aware way, could actually be the first step—because that sorrow is indicating that we're already willing to come close to the suffering. We are letting it in, which is why we're feeling the sorrow. But then instead of staying just with that, we can let it be the foundation for a compassionate response.

Thich Nhat Hanh had a wonderful phrase. He said, "Compassion is a verb." Compassion really implies some action that we take, whatever it might be—there's a response to the suffering. So I would just see the sorrow as a stepping stone to compassion and compassionate response.

In and of itself, I don't see sorrow as a difficulty. But it becomes a difficulty if we're not holding it in a skillful way—if we're simply getting identified with it and overwhelmed by it.

There's a teaching which expresses that there are two kinds of suffering: the suffering which leads to more suffering, and the suffering which leads to the end of suffering. All of that has to do with how we're relating to the suffering or sorrow that may be arising. Is it simply leading to more suffering, or is it leading to the end of suffering, which is that whole pathway of compassion?

In terms of the other question of just how much the news is impacting us these days—it is particularly strong here in the States these last couple of weeks with the election. It's been so intense. I noticed in myself, and in most of my friends, this endless checking on the news, ten times a day, checking in on the polls, whatever it might be. I realized how much agitation that was causing. And so I recognized the need to titrate the amount of information we're taking in, that we don't have to be engaging with it fifty times a day. Maybe once a day is enough, or twice a day. We're simply giving our whole

system a chance to absorb what we really need to understand, but also allowing times of relief from that so we can establish some strength and equilibrium again before the next hit of news.

I think this is a situation very particular to our times and the technology. We're living in a new world where the technology is so pervasive and we're just bombarded continually by the news. We have to learn how to manage that in a skillful way.

Regarding hope, I think it would be worth investigating that mind state or feeling you're calling hope, because that word could cover a range of different experiences. Some kinds of hope have expectation embedded right within them. We think, "Oh, I hope this will happen," and it's flavored by the expectation that it will. As I just mentioned, that's going to be a setup for suffering, because there are many more forces at work determining whether something is going to happen or not.

Sometimes, within the Buddhist framework, hope and fear are linked, because hope is wanting something to happen and fear is a fear that it won't happen. Very often those two get linked together, and that's not such a skillful approach.

The word I like, which I think might hold what you mean by hope in a more skillful way, is aspiration. I often use that word in contrast to expectation. We can have aspiration for many skillful things, and that aspiration is important because it sets our direction. If we have an aspiration and it's clear to us, then we can see what will be conducive toward that. But for me, that word doesn't have expectation embedded in it. It is simply the aspiration of what I feel or hope will be helpful or skillful. So I would just look carefully at what you're calling hope and tease out that part which is skillful and that part which is unskillful.

Regarding trauma reactions—collapse and overwhelm—this is an important subset of responses that we may be having. It takes a lot of care. I don't feel like I am actually an expert in working with trauma, although it does come up, of course, on meditation retreats, and I know how to work with it generally in that context.

What we've learned is the importance of really backing off somewhat from the trigger. Because if a trauma has been triggered and there is overwhelm, most of our experience has been that it's not wise to try to dig in deep and get to the bottom of it, trying to force a resolution. A lot more care is needed. A lot more gentleness is needed in the approach.

There are people who have done fantastic work in working with trauma. There's a recent book—I think the author's name is David Treleaven—something about mindfulness and trauma, where he really goes into quite a bit of detail about how to use mindfulness practice in working with trauma in a skillful way so it doesn't go to overwhelm.

What I would really say is that it does take care. I wouldn't try to push through it. I would look for some resources, either in person or through books, from people who have really developed a deep understanding of skillful ways of working with it. It takes a lot of care, and I would take that care with it.

So that's an interesting question. The quote from the Buddha was something like "anger with its poisoned source and honeyed tip." I think it's not difficult to relate to that, because often anger makes us feel strong and we feel right. There's often a kind of self-righteousness in it, and so there's a certain sense of power and strength coming from that emotion, which is very seductive.

I think it's really important, again, to be mindful of that, so that we're really watching our mind and discerning all of these different elements of the experience of anger. To experience mindfully what we're calling the honeyed tip—that surge of power or self-righteousness, whatever it is—we really recognize that and see that in the midst of the experience. And then also looking to what the Buddha called the poisoned source, the poisoned root, which means: can we see, in the midst of the experience, when we're in the middle of it, not only the honeyed tip but also the suffering aspect in this? And that is not hard to feel, because I think we can often feel the tightness or the contraction or the aversion or the separation, the distancing from either the situation or whoever we may be angry with.

There was another thought in my mind that just came and went with regard to this. I'll come back to it—a good ongoing teaching in impermanence, which, by the way, just increases with age.

Regarding teaching mindfulness to young children: not having young children or any children, I'm not sure I'm the best person to ask about this. As with the question about trauma, there are a lot of good books about this, so I would definitely investigate in that way. But the one underlying principle—and this is true both with children and everybody else—is that the most significant communication is not through what we say, but how we are. That is what's going to be communicated on the most basic and fundamental level. If we are mindful, if we are less reactive, if we are less judgmental, if we are less caught up in our own emotional stories, that is communicated to the kids, or to everybody around us. I wouldn't underestimate the power of that, because for me that seems the foundation.

On top of that, there are lots of exercises, mindfulness games for kids, and I would just explore the literature because there's a lot. Many of my friends work with kids in teaching mindfulness, and it's hugely successful.

There's one story that's just coming to mind. There was a mindfulness program in one of the rougher inner-city schools—I forget which city—where kids came from very challenging circumstances and were often involved with a lot of aggression and acting out at school. They did this mindfulness program, maybe a six-week program where they were teaching the kids mindfulness. The story is, something happened, there was an altercation between two kids, and one of the kids had pushed the other one up against the wall and was about to hit them. Then they paused, and the person said, "You should be glad I meditate," and stepped back from it.

In terms of efficacy, in terms of working with kids even in that rather challenging circumstance, it's quite amazing the effect it can have—just teaching some basic mindfulness skills. It's a beautiful thing to be sharing with kids, and I would certainly recommend that you explore that fully. There's a lot out there about how to do this.

Regarding the question about emotions: I do see it in the same way, although for the very reason you expressed—understanding the complexity of emotion, that it's not a single thing. Emotion is a whole complex of bodily sensations and thoughts and maybe images, the mental tone, the affect in the mind, and what distinguishes one emotion from another, what I call the specific coloration of the mind in different emotions. That's what makes it a little more difficult than the relatively simple—although not done very often—practice of asking, "What is a thought?" That's very simple and direct, and I think we can see it quite quickly.

One of the ways of seeing the empty nature of emotion is really to do just what you said, in terms of unpacking the whole experience so that we don't see it as some unified something, but rather as made up of many component parts. You might take it one by one. In the midst of some emotion, take some time and focus: what are the thoughts that are triggering it, or what are the thoughts that are expressing it? You focus just on the thought aspect.

And then maybe take some time where you're focusing just on the physical sensations of it. As you dive in and explore the physical sensations, depending on the level of concentration, it becomes possible to see with increasing refinement the changing nature of the sensations. They're not as solid as they feel. The sensations within an emotion are continually changing and moving. By seeing that, again, it begins to break up the sense of solidity.

It is very interesting to go back to what I said in the talk in terms of really seeing the conditionality of thought and emotion—to see what triggered the emotion and just watch that process. I'll give you an example. When I first began to notice how quickly thoughts can trigger an emotion, I just got really interested in watching this. I remember I was going for a walk here in Barre, Massachusetts. At that particular time, there was some kind of meeting coming up—I think it was an IMS board meeting. This is quite a few years ago, so I don't remember the details, but there was some sense of foreboding because there was some big conflict going on that had to be resolved.

As I was going for the walk, a thought came about the meeting and immediately I could feel a little anxiety. I just watched it: the thought, then anxiety. It interested me so much, just seeing how one triggered the other. But then I started playing. I intentionally started thinking the thoughts to see how they triggered the emotion. I was just playing with this process in the mind, investigating it. In that way, in seeing the conditionality of thought and emotion, I could say, "Oh yeah, the thought—it was just a thought. That's all it was." Creating this complex response, and watching it go back and forth like that—that really weakens the sense of the emotion being something solid and fixed and substantial.

There's a phrase by a Sri Lankan monk who died recently, a renowned scholar and meditation master. He talked about things being "circumstantial, not substantial." I liked that phrase because it encapsulates the idea that there's nothing substantial. Rather, everything arising is circumstantial, meaning conditions come together and the experience is there; the conditions change and the experience changes. Seeing that circumstantial nature, the conditionality of it, also reveals the essentially empty nature. There is nothing substantial in it.

Also, as I mentioned a little earlier, just noticing the impermanence of it. Even when an emotion is really strong and we're in it, relating in whatever way we are—more mindfully or a little less mindfully—at a certain point it goes. Paying attention to its impermanence matters. The Buddha talked about how insight into impermanence is really the doorway to the understanding of anattā, or selflessness, or insubstantiality. So we can use our insight into impermanence in that way too.

I want to back up one minute. One of the things I've noticed in myself, which I've come to appreciate in my own practice and life, is that over all these years of practice, I've come to a point where—for the most part, it's not perfect yet—but for the most part, when I'm suffering in one way or another, it piques my interest. Rather than it being some struggle I'm drowning in, if I'm suffering, it really starts the question: "Well, what's happening? What is going on in my mind that's creating the suffering?"

And it's never about an external situation. The situation may cause different emotions to arise within us, but how we're relating to that emotion is totally up to us. If we put the blame for how we're feeling on others, we're giving up our agency. We're really giving up our power. When we realize that different emotions are going to arise depending on what's going on, but how we relate to them is one hundred percent up to us—that's where the interest comes. How am I relating to what's happening that's causing suffering? That gets very interesting. We really look: Am I pushing something away? Am I attached? Am I clinging? Are there expectations? We can actually take the suffering to be the impetus for real investigation.

I've just found this approach hugely helpful in my life.

So with respect to relating to other people who may not be practicing mindfulness, and who may be caught in more unwholesome or unskillful mind states, two things come to mind. I think the first step does go back to what I mentioned earlier: in our interactions, not wanting them to be different. Because if that's the energy we're bringing to the exchange, it's not an inviting energy for communication.

I had this come up years ago when I was still in India—this goes back a long time now—but at times I would come home for a few months and spend some time with my mother. We had a pretty good relationship, and in fact, she was interested in meditation. But like all family dynamics, there were aspects where I thought, "If only she were a little less this or a little more that, she'd be so much happier." That was the attitude I started with, and it didn't work very well in terms of opening communication. If we just think about how we would feel if people were relating to us while wanting us to be different—very often, we just put up some kind of defense or close off a bit.

It was really amazing when I dropped back. As I said, we had a pretty good relationship, but I simply dropped back into accepting that this is how she is, and she'll probably stay this way. She's probably not going to change. When I got okay with that, when I became accepting of it, the whole relationship got so much easier because the energy between us was much cleaner. I wasn't always, even in a subtle way, pushing for a change. Once I cleared things up on my side energetically, I just relaxed with however she was being and how things unfolded. It was so much more easeful because I wasn't pushing against it. Then at times there were opportunities to engage in conversation in a more impersonal way—not "oh, you should really be different," but just genuine dharma discussion about different mind states and what might be skillful and not skillful. I think that's a big piece.

As for keeping equilibrium yourself in the chaos of dynamic relational situations—I think it is related to this, and again it goes back to expectation. If we have expectations for things to be a certain way and then they're not, we just get frustrated and fall out of equilibrium. If we're free of expectations, it's actually not that difficult. In a way, it's analogous to how we relate to pain in the body. An unpleasant interpersonal situation causing us distress is not so different. When there's pain in the body, at first, before people have really developed some skill in practice, we don't like it and we push against it and want to change it. Maybe the last thing in our mind is, "Oh, I can just be with this. I can open to it—it's unpleasant, and that's okay. It's okay that it's unpleasant. My mind doesn't have to be reactive to the unpleasantness." It's the same thing in our interpersonal relations.

The underlying, very simple foundation, which I have found to be basically the bedrock of interpersonal interactions, is to be kind—just to be kind, in the way we speak, in the way we interact. When that's the bottom line for us, when that's the space we're coming from, even when it's challenging, even when at times we do need to respond or set boundaries, we can do so from kindness. It's not saying that we just have to sit back and let difficult or harmful situations roll over us. Sometimes it does take an active response, but are we doing it with kindness, or are we doing it out of anger or frustration?

We've talked a little bit about mettā meditation, loving-kindness. In that phrase "loving-kindness," I always like to emphasize the kindness part, because love is a very big word with many different meanings and interpretations. Often we wonder, "Am I loving enough?" or fear that we're not. Kindness, to me, is much more down to earth.

It's much simpler. We know when we're being kind or unkind. And to practice that heart of kindness—it's just a beautiful quality. I think it really is the basis for skillful relationships.

The Dalai Lama actually had a teaching on this. He said, "Be kind whenever possible. It's always possible." And I think that's really true.

I'd just like to thank all of you for joining at this time. It's really been great. I've had a lot of fun, and I hope it's been helpful to you in some way.

I also have a lot of appreciation for Gaia House and all the various centers, because it's really the institutions which are holding the framework of what makes possible the transmission of the Dharma. It's been this way since the time of the Buddha, whether it

was the institution of the monastic sangha, which held the teachings, or in these days in the West, where it's often groups of lay Dharma practitioners. So I'm really glad to be of support also to Gaia House for the great work they're doing.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 57

# Dharma Transmission: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein and Dawn Scott

Joseph Goldstein · 1h29

> *In this intimate conversation hosted by William Edelglass at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, senior teacher Joseph Goldstein and emerging teacher Dawn Scott discuss the nature of Dharma transmission across generations. Joseph shares how his journey began in 1966 Thailand when a monk suggested he try meditating, leading to his pivotal meeting with Anagārika Munindraji in Bodh Gaya, who taught him that understanding the mind simply requires observing it. Dawn recounts her entry through Spirit Rock's family program, where Ajahn Amaro's presence and a mother's gratitude opened her heart to practice.*
>
> *The dialogue explores essential elements of authentic transmission: the critical importance of teachers maintaining their own practice, the interweaving of study and meditation (sutta-mayā paññā, cintā-mayā paññā, and bhāvanā-mayā paññā), and the responsibility of knowing the Buddha's teachings deeply. They examine how the Dharma addresses contemporary challenges—from climate crisis to racial justice—emphasizing that while the root causes of suffering remain greed, hatred, and delusion, teachers must transmute anger into compassion for sustainable engagement. The conversation thoughtfully questions the meaning of 'collective liberation' while honoring both socially engaged practice and solitary cultivation.*
>
> *Particularly moving is the discussion of how diverse teachers bring their cultural backgrounds into Dharma halls, making the teachings accessible through personal experience—whether through Spanish language or African American literary traditions. Joseph reflects on how his teaching has evolved over decades, from certainty to a lighter, more open relationship with views, demonstrating that the transmission itself continues to unfold.*

Buddhist studies.

Welcome, everyone. My name is William Edelglas. I'm Director of Studies at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Dawn, Joseph, and I are all speaking to you from a clearing in the mixed hardwood forests of Barre, Massachusetts, home of the Insight Meditation Retreat Center, the Forest Refuge, and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

Tonight, we'll be talking about Dharma transmission. In some classical Buddhist traditions, we hear of the Dharma being transmitted by the mountains, the waters, trees, the wind, birdsong. I felt something like this here in Barre. I have so much gratitude for the beech, the maple, the oak, birch trees, the ash trees, and so many of the other beings surrounding us here—the coyotes we hear at night, and the owls, the morning doves, the rabbits, chipmunks, and the waters that nourish us all and flow east to the Atlantic Ocean.

I want to acknowledge that this land was stewarded by the Nipmuc people, who for countless generations were living here amongst these trees. Many continue to live here. This area was traditionally known as Niponet. It's helpful for me personally to ground myself here in this place, remembering that there were people living fulfilling lives here long before the time of the Buddha.

This morning, one of my colleagues at BCBS mentioned that there were participants in this webinar from more than three dozen countries. It's really moving to me to think of us all grounded in the practices that we've inherited and grounded in the different places where each of us is situated now, coming together.

We're a small center, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. We only have 32 beds and we offer intimate residential retreats. For a number of years we've offered online programs. With the pandemic, it's been so beautiful for us to offer retreats, online courses, and programs like this to such a broad diversity of people with so many different practices, so many different experiences, so many different lineages. We offer the opportunity to learn some new practices, perhaps insight dialogue or exploring the relationship between Dharma and art, or writing a Buddhist essay, or doing a six-week program on studying the Pali suttas.

I think for Barre Center for Buddhist Studies—for many of us, as with many of the Dharma centers around the world today—we're exploring questions about how we remain grounded in the liberating wisdom and practices of the traditions we've inherited, even as we find ourselves also called to address the turbulence and urgency of these times. This is a conversation that's been ongoing for us as a community, and I'm so glad, Joseph and Dawn, that you are joining us for this conversation.

I'll give you each a very brief introduction with the hope that in our conversation, you'll be able to share more of what might be relevant.

Joseph, you've been practicing Buddhist meditation since the mid-60s. Starting in the mid-1970s, you've been leading insight retreats and loving-kindness retreats in many places around the world. It was about that time that you co-founded the Insight Medita-

tion Center, where you are still a guiding teacher. Some years after that, you co-founded the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and we're so grateful you've been on the board for so many years. In addition to your teaching retreats, you've written a number of books that have been Dharma gates, that have invited so many people onto the path to cultivate wisdom and an open heart. These include *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, *A Heart Full of Peace*, *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*, and *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*. Relevant to our conversation tonight, I've really appreciated seeing how you have been so supportive of so many young teachers. And on a more personal note, as a neighbor, I have found you to be funny and open-minded in conversation, and certainly for me, you've taken delight in playing with my daughters, which means a lot.

Dawn, you haven't been practicing for quite as long as Joseph, but you've been practicing for a long time. You've worked for many years at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center, and you are in the final year of the IMS teacher training program. You teach regularly at IMS and BCBS. As everyone in our communities knows, you've become a very well-respected and beloved Dharma teacher and are one of the lead faculty members for the joint program for IMS and BCBS that we will be starting next year, Love and Liberation, in 2022. We're so grateful that you will be continuing to spend part of the pandemic here with us in Barre.

Thank you so much, both of you, for joining us. Joseph, maybe you'd start by leading us in a short sit.

We'll just sit for five or so minutes. Take a comfortable, alert posture.

Usually in this tradition, we sit with our eyes closed, but it's also possible to sit with eyes open if you're accustomed to that. Maybe take a few deep breaths just as a way of settling into the body, landing here. Letting the breath now find its own natural rhythm. Be aware of your sitting posture. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. It's really that simple.

Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise, but an exercise in awareness and mindfulness. So we don't need to make the breath any special way. Simply being aware of it, each one as it presents itself, deep or shallow, long or short. We're simply mindful of each breath as it is.

You may notice where in the body you feel the breath most clearly. Is it the air passing the nostrils or the movement of the chest or the abdomen? Or is it throughout the whole body? Simply to notice.

You might become aware of other sensations in the body that call the attention. Open to the feeling of those sensations, feeling them, and also noticing how they change. They get stronger or weaker, shift position. And then settling back into the awareness of the whole body and the body breathing.

Also stay alert for the arising of thoughts or images in the mind. It's sometimes helpful to make a very soft mental acknowledgment, a mental note—"thinking," or "seeing" if it's an image. Noticing how the thoughts and images also arise and pass away. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

Thank you, Joseph. I was thinking we would start with each of you sharing something about how the Dharma was transmitted to you, how you came to the Dharma, and situating yourselves a little in this conversation in a more singular way. Maybe Joseph, you could start us off.

Well, it's going back quite a few years now to 1966 or so. I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I'd finished college and studied philosophy at school, then went off to the Peace Corps. And at a certain point, I started attending discussion groups led by two Buddhist monks for Westerners who were living in Bangkok.

It was an interesting meeting. They were held at a quite famous marble temple, this beautiful temple. There was a group of maybe twenty or so people, Westerners. And the monks were giving the basic teachings. But having studied philosophy, I went there and I was asking so many questions that people stopped coming because they were getting so annoyed with me. I think out of desperation, one of the monks said, "Why don't you try meditating?"

Of course I was young—twenty, twenty-one years old. First time in Asia, it was all very exotic for me. I didn't really know anything about Buddhism, didn't know anything about meditation. So he gave me just the very basic instructions, kind of as we did just at the beginning here. You know, sitting down, being with the breath, noticing what's happening.

So I got all my paraphernalia together and kind of sat. And I set my alarm clock for five minutes because I didn't want to sit too much. But it was really quite amazing. Something very significant happened even in that first five minutes. It's not that it was any great enlightenment experience. But what happened was that I saw there was a way to look into the mind as well as looking out through it—that there was actually a methodology for looking inwards.

I was just so excited by this because going from the study of philosophy, which seemed very external and academic, and here was this very immediate, direct way of looking at one's own mind—I got so excited by this that I started inviting my friends over to watch me meditate. That didn't last very long. But that's how revelatory it was for me.

After my Peace Corps days, I came back to the States and tried to practice on my own. But it got very confusing. I really hadn't had very detailed instructions.

And so I was just mixing up a lot of different things. And I realized then that I needed a teacher. And I got motivated to go back to Asia. I ended up in India, and after traveling around a bit, ended up in Bodh Gaya, which of course is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, where I met my first teacher, Anagarika Munindraji.

He said something just when I met him that was so striking to me. It really hooked me in my Dharma practice, and it reinforced what I had learned in my first five minutes. He said, "If you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it."

It was that simple. There was nothing to join. There were no rituals and no ceremonies. It was just: if you want to understand your mind, observe it. And it made so much sense. It was just such common sense. That really motivated all these years of practice. That was really the beginning of it.

*

I'm actually, as I listen to you, Joseph, I'm really struck by just how our entry points were similar and yet so different. You had to go to Asia to connect with a teacher, whereas I just had to travel thirty minutes from my house to connect with the Dharma and didn't have to leave the United States at all. It's a testament to what your generation brought back and helped seed here, which had started to bloom and was ready for someone like me.

My entry into Dharma was a boy, and that boy and I are still together—sixteen years now. My Dharma partner had been a factor, actually. I was in school, and we were apart nine months out of the year. Then I would come back for about three months during the summer, so we had twelve weeks together. He told me that he would be volunteering at the family retreat at Spirit Rock. And I thought, we only have twelve weeks together—why do you want to go away and volunteer at a family retreat to serve as a mindful leader?

He said, "Well, why don't you come? You really enjoy children. You love families. Why don't you just come?"

And I thought, no, I might like it. I might enjoy it. And to my horror, I hated family retreat. I hated it. The irony of all this is that three years later, I ended up serving the family program at Spirit Rock as the family program coordinator. I was raised in the Dharma by all those families, all the staff, all the teachers. But at that first retreat, I thought the songs were saccharine. I thought the art projects were saccharine. Everyone's talking about their feelings and doing all this meditating.

But there was a moment in front of the dining hall at Spirit Rock. I was with Ajahn Amaro, and he asked me what I thought of the retreat. I was just straight up with him. I said, "I hate it. It's too saccharine. It's too goody-goody."

He was very patient with me and said, "Yeah, it's like a goodness camp, isn't it?"

There's a way in which he took my word "goody-goody" and turned it into "good"—all the judgment that I'd filled that word with—and reminded me, or invited me, to feel into the goodness that was actually there. I remember how clear his eyes were, how curious they were. They've closed this trail at Spirit Rock now, but there used to be a trail that connected the picnic tables right outside the dining hall, and it led up to the meditation hall. My memory is that he didn't have any shoes on, that he was just walking up this path. And I thought, he hardly has anything, and yet he seems so happy and alive and curious.

That made an impression on my heart—left an indelible impression on my heart.

And the retreat is working on me and my heart softening.

There's this very beautiful ritual at the end of family retreat where the volunteers and teachers create two parallel lines and bow in the families as they walk into the meditation hall. I came face to face with a mother who was weeping, radiating this unabashed gratitude. Something happened for me. To this day, I don't quite understand what happened, but my heart just opened—and my sweetheart knew when to come in. He said, "Well, do you want to sit a retreat? There's a young adult retreat that's going to happen."

I sat that retreat, and Diana Winston offered a teaching on the eight worldly winds, using the Buddha's quest for awakening on the night of his enlightenment as an archetype we could all relate to. After that talk, I remember thinking: I could be doing everything perfectly, and the eight worldly winds will still be blowing through my life. I just felt like the pressure was off. I wanted to know more. I wanted to practice.

So I went back to school and practiced. Then I'd come back to Spirit Rock in the summers to volunteer—for family retreat, because I'd fallen in love with it by then, and for the young adult retreat, and for the Abhayagiri Teen Weekend. Then back to school again.

When I graduated, I remember being on the phone with my mentor, telling her I didn't want to continue with school—I just wanted to sit retreats. She asked, "Have you ever thought of sitting a long retreat, like a month long?" I said, "Do you think I could do that?" And she said, "Of course you can." Sometimes that's all you need—someone who believes in you and encourages you.

I sat that retreat and started working at Spirit Rock. I'm very grateful to them because they allowed me to continue working while also giving myself to the practice and sitting retreats there. So that's the entry in.

*Go on, you inspired me. I want to go on retreat. Maybe we can go on retreat together. We're not far away. Thanks so much, Dawn.*

*So the theme of our conversation is Dharma transmission. If you could pause for a little while and try to help us understand what we're talking about when we talk about Dharma transmission—the overarching question being: how do these liberating practices and wisdom that we've inherited apply to these times? How do they speak to these times? Is that what we're really talking about with Dharma transmission?*

Well, I think it might be good to clarify what we mean by Dharma. That's the Sanskrit version—in Pali, Dhamma—but it's a word with a broad range of meanings. The most general would be nature, or the laws of nature. In that sense, as you mentioned in the introduction, nature can be a great teacher, and so there can be a transmission of that.

More specifically, and in our context, Dharma often means the teachings of the Buddha as he explained the laws of nature. When we talk about Dharma transmission, generally we're talking about the transmission of the teachings and the experience that come from practicing them—teachings that originated with the Buddha and have been passed down for 2,600 years. That itself is remarkable: that there has been a continuity of transmission from the time of the Buddha until today. They've maintained such clarity and have as much meaning for us now as they did all those centuries ago. I find that quite extraordinary.

And then there's the whole question of skillful means—how to impart the teachings. Different lineages, traditions, and teachers all have their own particular style of conveying them. I think that's what we're all involved in. We're all part of this chain of transmission going back to the Buddha's time.

And that can be pretty daunting. I remember once, when I was a fairly new teacher, I was leading a retreat in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, and giving a Dharma talk under the Bodhi tree. That was the most difficult, challenging talk I have ever given.

*I'm so glad that's not part of the teacher training! Thank you so much for not including that.*

Actually, this is a good idea, Maggie. You did it for us.

It was so challenging because it was as if the Buddha was sitting behind me listening to all my little Dharma jokes.

But it does reflect this whole idea of transmission and continuity over the years. It's interesting, Joseph, when you talk about just being a part of this chain, this passing down of these liberative teachings through the generations. I feel like the teacher training is a transmission of sorts, in that way. And this training has gone by so fast, yet we're still in it. We've got a couple more trainings and then it culminates in our graduation.

There's so much that has been transmitted to us by everyone on the faculty. I just wonder, are there things that you would long for us to continue to be in relationship with and pass on, if we continue teaching the next generation of practitioners and teachers?

In a way, for me, the most powerful part of the transmission in the training is the emphasis—which I hope got conveyed—on the critical value, the necessity, of all of us continuing our own practice. That's actually where the teaching comes from. The teaching comes out of our own practice and experience, this verified faith that's derived through our continued practice.

I feel like our cohort has been dedicated to that. We just love to practice. You send an email to someone in our cohort and inevitably you get back these replies of "I'm on retreat for a couple of months." I feel like that commitment was there before we started the training, and the training has emphasized and conveyed that even further.

I think one of the challenges is going to be—and I see this in the whole transmission of the Dharma in the West and everything that's evolved over these last forty or so years—that there's such interest and such demand for the teachings that it's very easy for teachers to get so busy sharing the Dharma that sometimes one's own practice can

fall by the wayside. We want to be giving, serving, and helping. And so that's a danger, really. I find for myself it's been invaluable to carve out a good chunk of time every year.

Actually, I was really inspired by something you had said years ago. I think you had come to Spirit Rock to teach the July Insight Retreat, and you talked to the staff. I remember you talking about the fact that you take anywhere from two to three months to practice every year. I was so inspired by that. To this day, when William, Jill, and I are planning a program, part of scheduling has been really respecting the fact that we've set aside time to be away practicing.

That's really important. What else do you teach from?

There's one other aspect of transmission that I think is really important, and I think it was instilled in me by my first teacher, Munindraji. I met him when I went to Bodh Gaya. He had just come back from, I think, nine years in Burma, where he had done a lot of practice and the whole teacher training there. But he also devoted five or six years to thorough study of the texts—the complete suttas, the Abhidhamma, the Vinaya, all the commentaries. He was totally immersed in the teachings of the Buddha, and he taught that way. Even when he was teaching meditation, it was all embedded in the larger context of the whole teachings and the suttas.

Mahasi Sayadaw, who was his teacher, was also one of the great practitioner-scholars. So there's one stream of teachers who have really combined both study and practice. For myself, I've found that so helpful, because the Dharma is always much vaster than our own individual experience. We may have powerful, transforming experiences, but the Dharma is vast. It's the study aspect which can actually open up so many of those doors.

It's so interesting—I had heard about this interplay between study, reflection, and meditative development. I heard people talking about it, but I didn't know that the Buddha had actually named it as a way of deepening our understanding of Dharma: *suta mayā paññā*, *cintā mayā paññā*, and *bhāvanā mayā paññā*. It was wonderful to see it in the suttas. But my own relationship with it really was the meditative practice, the meditative development, that called me first.

I was pretty shy of the suttas. I mean, those are some big volumes over there. They seem pretty intimidating. It really wasn't until I felt the relationship between what the teachings were actually saying in my own practice that the suttas came to life for me.

I remember it was my second long retreat. Guy was giving a talk—I forget what he was giving a talk on—but he was using an excerpt from the Honeyball Sutta. And I just liked it. For some reason, it just appealed to me. So I wrote him a note asking, "Can you just give me that part of the sutta?" I know we're not supposed to read, but I was an undisciplined yogi during that second long retreat that I sat.

So I was just reading that portion of the sutta, not the whole thing, and I'd read it over and over again, not realizing that I had memorized parts of it. It was just in my frame of reference, in the background. And I remember sitting and then seeing my own mind doing what the sutta had described. It just strengthened my faith in the teachings—to see it so clearly. And the gratitude I had to the Buddha: "You figured this out all on your own. You didn't need a Buddha. You figured this out." It strengthened my faith. Really strengthened my faith.

**Joseph:** There's a really important point here, and I love that story of how we can internalize the teaching and then actually have it come up in our meditation at particular times. I think that points to something which may sometimes be misunderstood. When we read the Buddhist texts or the discourses, it's easy to read it as Buddhist philosophy. We have various views of it, we agree or we don't agree. But really all the teachings, all the suttas, are instructions. It's not philosophy—it is philosophy in a way—but really the Buddha is just telling us: do this and you'll experience some results.

Just one suggestion for people who are watching and listening now: if you'd like to get a taste of how intertwined study and practice can be, I would recommend any of the discourses of Mahasi Sayadaw explicating a sutta. You could probably find these online. He wrote a lot, but he also wrote quite short booklets on individual suttas. It's amazing how he uses the sutta and, in his discourse, applies it to the meditation practice. It's quite an amazing interweaving of study and practice, and it might give you all a flavor of the potential of that.

**Interviewer:** I'm curious—how in the teacher training, or what either of you think is the role of teaching study or studying in the transmission of the Dharma?

**Joseph:** I feel it's really important because it also provides a reference point. But I want to back up a little bit.

In teaching and being in this line of transmission going back to the Buddha up until now—it's a huge responsibility. It's not a trivial undertaking, on a few different levels. On one level, people come and really entrust their hearts and minds to us as teachers.

People get into a very open and sometimes vulnerable place. So there's a huge responsibility there. To be as grounded as possible in as deep an understanding of the Dharma as possible—I think that's one way of fulfilling that responsibility.

It also provides a reference point for our own latest ideas about practice.

*_Alexis:_* Say that again, Joseph. I missed that. Our what?

*_Joseph:_* Our own latest ideas.

*_Alexis:_* Okay.

*_Joseph:_* We can be going along, practicing, and we have lots of different inputs and influences. "Oh, this sounds great."

I'm going to bring this into the teachings. And often it's great, often it's wonderful. But sometimes it may be a little off from the real teachings of the Buddha. So in the context of transmitting the Buddha's teachings, I think there really is a responsibility to know in as much depth as possible what they actually are.

There's something online—I don't know if it's a blog—called "Did the Buddha Really Say That?" And it examines a lot of things that are getting expressed these days. Very commonly someone will introduce a teaching with, "Oh, the Buddha said such and such." It's a fascinating study. Whoever this person is goes back and checks: well, did the Buddha really say that? And more often than not, no. It's a great study—just that real grounding that I think is so, so helpful.

One of the trainees shared, "I actually feel like as trainees, the suttas have helped us bond in a way. We create these study groups and we're exchanging ideas and we're talking about them and trying to understand them. It's been a way for us to connect and deepen our understanding while also deepening our connection to each other."

That's a great thing to be doing.

Another trainee raised a question: "Joseph, you had used the term skillful means earlier—that as a teacher, one tries to find skillful means to teach what is an appropriate supportive practice for the students. And skillful means can also be a term that would allow a teacher to address some things which maybe the Buddha didn't address explicitly, but that as contemporary practitioners and teachers we face. Whether it's the challenges of living in a hyper-connected world—iPhones, cell phones, the internet—or other challenges of what it means to live as an ethical person. What would right livelihood or wise action or wise thinking be in the context of climate change, or the kinds of challenges that liberation movements are trying to address—racism, sexism, the way

we make certain kinds of bodies the norm, whether racially or by gender or ability? There are these two foundational Buddhist doctrines of impermanence—that everything is changing—and dependent origination—that everything is dependent on causes and conditions. And our life as practitioners and teachers, the situation we find ourselves in right now, is indeed dependent upon all the causes and conditions of our thinking and our lives. I'm curious what you think is the skillful role for a teacher today to address some of what feels very urgent to many practitioners."

I think there are different levels of understanding that question. On one level, I think the Buddha did address all of it, because the root cause of the kinds of situations and problems that you mentioned—that we face in our society—the root cause of suffering is greed and hatred and delusion. So on the most fundamental level, when we're helping people understand how those forces work in the mind and how they manifest, we're addressing the essential issue. How does greed manifest in all the choices we make in our lives and that society makes? How does fear and anger and hatred manifest? We can see it being played out in so many different ways.

So the two levels are: on one hand, a more formal Dharma practice can really be addressing the root causes of all the kinds of suffering that are out there. And then on another level—we might call it socially engaged Buddhism—we're really engaging in specific arenas of difficulty and suffering in the world. We see, really out of compassion for the suffering, "What can I do? How can I help in this situation?"

But I feel it's really important to connect those two. As practitioners of the Dharma, as we engage in addressing the problems that we face, it should be rooted in the deeper understanding of the root causes. And that's where the Buddhist teachings are just so powerful.

I'll give you an example of what happens when we don't do that. For many years—this goes back a way—I was teaching retreats for environmental and social activists. These were people on the front lines of social engagement doing great work. The problem that was most commonly brought up in those retreats was burnout. And one of the reasons for burnout is that sometimes people try to address these problems from anger. That's their fuel.

They get really angry, and it's understandable because there are so many situations of oppression or injustice, so many arenas where when we face them we can feel the anger coming up. That emotion, as a message that something needs to be done here, can be valuable. But it's not a sustainable energy for continuing action because it burns us up—we get burned out.

And so there was a very interesting discussion on these retreats about how to transmute the motivation of anger as the source of action to compassion as a source of action. We could take the same actions out of compassion for the suffering that's there, rather than out of anger at the perpetrators. And it's a completely different mind state, a completely different heart space, and much more sustainable. It actually brings a greater result.

So that's why I think these two levels really work together. They're not distinct in my mind.

**Speaker 2:** What you're saying about having the fuel of our engagement with the world and wanting to affect change at a societal level coming from compassion as opposed to anger—it reminds me so much of King's third principle of Kingian nonviolence. I'm not crazy about the language, but I just love the spirit that's embedded in the words. It says, "We attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil." We're looking at deconstructing the conditions that have led to systemic harm, not making an opponent out of the personalities.

**Speaker 1:** That's beautiful, and I feel that's really in alignment with the whole transmission of the Dharma. And actually, that's what we as Dharma practitioners can contribute to social engagement, because not everybody understands that, or is even aware of the possibility of it. Because as is probably obvious to all of us, it's not necessarily easy to let go of anger. It takes practice to move from anger to compassion. So that takes a real practice. And that's definitely a contribution that these teachings can make.

**Speaker 3:** I love the word that you use—transmuting. Transmuting the anger into compassionate action. I think it's a question that's really up in our communities, our practice communities right now. Because as you were saying, William, during the introduction, we're living in times that are very turbulent and very urgent. The climate crisis and racial injustice and gender equity and dismantling patriarchy... And I think it's beautiful that people are asking, "How can the Dharma—what does the Dharma have to say to this? How can we use the Dharma to address these things?"

What comes up for me is this term that's been floating around. I guess I started hearing it maybe two, three years ago—this phrase "collective liberation." And I see the both of you smiling.

**Speaker 1:** Well, I have questions about this too.

**Speaker 3:** I have questions about it too. I'm in process around it.

**Speaker 2:** What does that even mean?

*_Speaker 3:_* Exactly. I've been wondering that. What does it mean? And I think if we're talking about large groups of people waking up in the ways that are defined in Buddhism—I don't quite... that doesn't feel realistic to me. In order to come here to Barre, I had to drive cross country, and I just felt how vast this country is and the different kinds of people in it and the different ways that we live. So when we say collective liberation, are we talking about—would it include other religions and other practices from other backgrounds? What do we mean by this?

Is it possible for a dedicated group of people who want to affect change at the societal level, who are inspired by and using the teachings of Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, as inspiration and fuel? That seems possible to me. And I think we saw it in the civil rights movement. We saw a dedicated group of young people trained by an older generation in Kingian, Gandhian, nonviolent action. They studied it. They trained in it. They practiced it. And it was fueled by this deep Christian ethic of love. And their effort—we're here together because of their efforts, right? They impacted us in such beautiful, profound ways that still have this lasting impact.

So I think a group of people inspired by the teachings of the Dharma, where the teachings of the Buddha would inform the *how* of social action—how to actually engage at this level—I think that's possible. Is it possible for, say, a group of ten or twenty people who actually want to metabolize the ways that they've been acculturated to relate to women, to relate to people of different races, and see the defilements and actually see through those defilements and metabolize them—through, just to use the Buddhist language, repeatedly seeing with wisdom? I hope that's possible. And I know of groups who have come together with that as their goal. We'll see what happens.

I so want collective liberation to be a reality.

I think one of the issues or clarifications that's needed is just an understanding that the word liberation can have many different meanings. Very similar to the word desire. Because very often in teaching, it's commonly understood that desire is the cause of suffering. And in Pali, there's a very specific word for that kind of desire—clinging and grasping and craving. But in English, we use the word desire in many different ways. Desire can be wholesome. There's a desire to be more compassionate or more loving or awakened. And I think liberation has that same range of meanings in English.

So when we use a term or a phrase like collective liberation, in order to actually come to some common understanding of it, anybody using that term would have to define: what do you mean by liberation? Are you meaning, in the classical Buddhist

sense, the uprooting of the defilements of the mind? Or are you meaning, as you suggested, helping to alleviate a lot of the causes, the symptoms of the greed, hatred, and delusion as they're manifesting in the world?

It seems very unlikely to me that there will be universal collective liberation.

You can make it happen, Joseph. You can do it!

But we can move in that direction, certainly. I mean, if the Buddha couldn't do it, I'm trying to stay a little bit realistic here. But we can be going in that direction. That can be our aspiration. I do think it is a traditional aspiration of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is precisely the one whose aspiration is to support universal liberation.

I wonder if there are different ways of thinking about the term collective liberation that might be more consonant with, complementary to, the more traditional view. Here's one way of thinking about it that I think some people might be sympathetic to.

If it's the case that we're always conditioned by the communities that we live in, by the language that we speak, by the social practices that we're caught up in—which at some point I think we are, even though we may be liberated from that at some point—then each of us is caught up in ways of thinking and social practices which lead to the suffering of other people. To use the examples that Dawn was thinking about: patriarchy, sexism, racism, environmental challenges.

To the degree that we are participating smoothly in these without bringing some kind of critical awareness to those ways of thinking—can we really practice wise thinking? Can we practice wise action? Can we practice wise speech? Can we practice wise livelihood if our thinking is caught up in social practices and a language that does violence to some people?

So collective liberation in that sense is: I need to liberate myself from a whole variety of ways of talking and thinking that I'm just born into and take as a natural given, as opposed to recognizing them as social practices. And I can't really practice all the steps on the Eightfold Path until I have done the kind of critical work that would allow me to practice wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise thinking.

Some people who would defend the use of the term collective liberation would say: if you really want to practice wise action and wise speech, having some critical awareness of the ways in which language can harm people would be necessary. And that is a social practice. That's a collective practice, that kind of critical work. So for me as an individual to be liberated requires doing some of that practice together.

I think that's what some people might say in response—not that collective liberation means everybody will be liberated together, or even necessarily that large groups of people will be liberated together, though there's another way some defenders of the term might speak. But what I'm articulating might even be more consonant with an individual being liberated, while recognizing that it requires this work to be done with spiritual friends and others.

In community, yes. I know groups of people who are dedicated to that right now, who are taking that up.

I want to offer an additional comment because I agree with that, and it's really inspiring. As you've expressed it, I think you've expressed it really beautifully. It really is the overcoming, the seeing through the delusion that's in our minds in all these areas. And so I see that as being very much part of our practice. But I'd also like to put in a plug for all those people who may—and there aren't many of them—but all those people who may be

sitting in a cave someplace, practicing with the aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all. I think of the Bodhisattva, the Buddha, before his awakening. How many lifetimes did he spend not engaged in social interaction, but off by himself cultivating—in certain lifetimes anyway—cultivating the paramis that come from solitude, like deep concentration. I think that's also part of a path to liberation.

So as much as I value and also try to practice everything you said, I have a lot of respect for people who do take themselves apart, who really practice maybe by themselves or in a very small community in a very intensive way. And to me, that is as much social action as being on the front lines of engagement. I wouldn't separate them. I think there are different expressions of wanting to alleviate the suffering of all.

For many of us, especially those of us who are laypeople, we are living in the world and involved. And so I have a lot of respect and appreciation for that, exactly as you described it. In all the work that we've done at IMS and in that community here at BCBS—the work on ongoing racism—we've been doing that and trying to explore and understand it for maybe ten or more years now, and it's been hugely opening for me. It's been one of the most powerful experiences of these last years. So I see, personally, the tremendous value of that.

And I also appreciate the Bodhisattva before he became Buddha. We're benefiting from his time in the cave 2,600 years later. So to me, what he was doing then was as much social action in terms of benefiting others as what we're doing now as we're engaged in society. I'd just like to bring in that aspect as well. But I see it as both.

*Sebene:* I'm deeply sympathetic to that. I remember living in Dharamsala, in India—one of the things that I loved was looking up and seeing people who had been sitting in caves for ten years or fifteen years, and being neighbors with a guy who had spent twenty years in a cave. There's something about being near such a person. I feel that to some degree with Bhikkhu Analayo, our neighbor here. There's something deeply inspiring about that commitment to practice that I find very moving.

I want to follow up on this comment you just made, Joseph, about how transformative it's been for you and how much you've learned. I guess I want to pose the question to both of you: In what way might that opening not just change social practice at IMS—language, structures of retreat—but might also change in some way the teaching of the Dharma or the transmission of the Dharma? What does it mean that we have a group of yogis coming on retreat and a group of teachers who come with very different racialized, gendered experiences? In what way does that impact how the Dharma is taught, and how does the Dharma speak to a much more diverse group of people?

*Spring:* You see this already happening in my cohort. Some of them were at the BIPOC retreat at IMS this summer.

*Sebene:* You want to say what BIPOC refers to?

*Spring:* Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. A lot of words. And it was such a blessed retreat, partly because it was right after George Floyd was murdered, so it felt good to come together. Also, of the six teachers, five were from the IMS cohort. I've gotten to spend the past three years with them, but to feel the Dharma moving through them in the way that is particular to them was very, very moving.

What really comes to mind is Andrea Castillo, who talked about how just speaking the Dharma in Spanish changed her teaching. I don't remember all the details, but I remember her describing how her teaching was transformed because she was working with predominantly Hispanic women.

I see it in my own teaching too. What's happening is we're using the specifics of our culture as a gateway to our exploration of these liberative teachings. For instance, I recently offered a talk where part of it explored fostering empathy through using your imagination in ethical, moral ways, and I brought in a scene from *A Raisin in the Sun*. It was very personal, but also using the particular to get to these universal teachings.

The reason I was inspired to do this is that Dara and I had gone for a walk, and we were talking about how African Americans—just given our history in this country—in order not to fall into despair or bitterness, we've had to cultivate the Brahma Viharas. For real. And in that moment in the play, Mama is using compassion and compassionate action to save her family from the gravitational pull of internalized racism.

So I feel like we're bringing in the stuff of our culture to make the teachings come alive and illustrate them in ways that feel personal—that will connect with other people who look like me, who look like Andrea Castillo.

**Joseph:** Everything you just said so beautifully was precisely the motivation for this last teacher training cohort.

Just maybe some of the people listening know, but the idea behind this particular training was to train more people of color to be teachers for exactly the reason you're saying—to be able to express from the inside, coming from your own personal experience of the place we live, in everything that is, and realizing the need for that. Teachers have to be able to manifest that and show that.

It's beautiful.

I just remember the first time I heard someone quote James Baldwin in a Dharma hall, and I wept. It meant so much to me. It was like, oh, I can be here. I can fully bring more of myself into this hall.

It's a beautiful thing.

We got about halfway through the questions I was thinking of asking, and we're going to move to some final comments at closing. But I'm wondering if either of you have any last thoughts or questions for each other, thoughts that you'd like to share.

I do have a question for you, Joseph, and maybe I'll just ask you offline, because I think it would open up like forty-five minutes worth of material. It has to do with something I noticed—I was listening to one of your first talks that's on Dharma Seed. You probably were giving talks before then, but this was July of 1974.

Maybe we'll have a part two of this, I don't know. But I was curious—maybe you can speak to this in two minutes or something. In listening to the talk, I was struck by how much has not changed in terms of how you offered the teachings. There was this comprehensive understanding that you just felt was underneath what you were sharing. There was your characteristic clarity. There was your concern—you were offering liber-

ative teachings and you still do that. But there are ways in which you were different too. And I'm curious: how would you characterize the way that you've changed over the years?

I'm very aware of at least one aspect of that change. And I think this has been true in terms of my teaching in Dharma, but this movement has also been acknowledged more generally in society as people get older. So it's some combination. I knew a lot more then than I do now. I was much more convinced that everything I knew was right back then. And so it was grounded very much in the teaching, so I think I didn't go too far off, but there was that energy of, "Yeah, this is how it is."

Over the years—and I think it's partially just aging and getting older, but also a fruit of the practice—there's been a letting go of attachment to views. It doesn't mean that we don't have our views and ways of understanding, but the grip of attachment to them has really loosened a lot, and it's made me a lot happier.

It's wonderful you mention that because now when you teach, one of the things I associate with you is how much you laugh. There wasn't a lot of laughter in that first talk.

No, no. That's an indication. So I recommend this to everybody: you don't have to wait until you're 76. We can have various understandings but without the certainty that they are the absolute truth.

Thank you. And it does make for a much more engaged conversation, where we really can learn from one another, when we have that openness.

It just puts people at ease.

Yes, it's a wonderful entry. Something we can all look forward to with aging.

Joseph, maybe this would be a good time to say a few words.

One aspect of transmission I was thinking about—we think back to the Buddha establishing the monastic order as a structure and an organization. I find it totally remarkable that this same organizing structure has lasted 2,600 years. This order of nuns and monks, and we could also include the lay people.

And one of the powers of the structure of the monastic order was that they really were the container for preserving the teachings. The reason that they're available to us now, that we can practice them, is because they were held by all these generations of nuns and monks and the monasteries for thousands of years. It's quite extraordinary.

What's happening now, particularly in the West, is that lay people are carrying a lot of that responsibility of holding the teachings, preserving the teachings. This is quite new, actually, in the history of Buddhism. It's mostly been the monastic orders. So something quite different is happening now in our society and in the transmission of the Dharma.

One of the things that makes it possible for us as lay teachers to be holding and preserving the teachings are the institutions, the organizations which support them—one of which is the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. It's actually the organization which provides the structure and foundation for people being able to offer and share the teachings with so many. Just before we started, William and some of the staff at the study center said there were about 1,200 people on this call, which is amazing. But it took the organization of the staff at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies to put this on.

This is just by way of encouraging all of us to be supportive of the organizations that are really holding and serving as the container for the continuation of the teachings. I find it inspiring to see that happen. It would be wonderful for people to really understand the value of that and be supportive in whatever way is possible.

---

So feel free to close your eyes if you like. You can practice with the eyes open—just allow your gaze to be soft, whether your eyes are open or closed.

Just connecting with the felt sense of the body sitting. As if the entire body could be filled with mindfulness. Sati. Awareness.

Perhaps allowing your attention to rest on the sensations of breathing in the body. Or even sounds in your immediate environment. Just resting and receiving. Breath. Sounds. Breath or sound—this attentive knowing.

Taking a moment to appreciate any wholesome, beautiful qualities that arose for us during our time together. Perhaps patience. Truth-telling.

May all the wholesome energies that we've cultivated here together touch and be of benefit to everyone that we come in contact with in the days, weeks, and months to come.

May all beings everywhere, without exception, know safety and ease. Peace. May they know health and well-being. May they be able to care for themselves, come by the basic necessities of life with ease and happiness. May all beings everywhere be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

CHAPTER 58

# Papañca, Part 1

Joseph Goldstein · 1h33

> *Fresh from a three-month home retreat, Joseph Goldstein offers a deep exploration of papañca—the proliferating tendencies of mind that lie at the root of suffering. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Bāhiya Sutta (Ud 1.10), he examines how our entire experience consists of just six sense bases: eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes, body and tactile sensations, and mind and mental activities.*
>
> *The talk illuminates three powerful forces that construct and strengthen our sense of self: craving (rooted in 'mine'), conceit or māna (the felt sense of 'I am'), and wrong view (belief in an unchanging self). Joseph explains how these manifest through the phrases 'this is mine, this I am, this is myself,' and shares personal examples demonstrating how quickly the mind proliferates—from resolving to stop craving to fantasizing about meditation sweatshirts in seconds.*
>
> *Practical applications include recognizing desire as a 'migraine' rather than pleasure, using struggle as feedback for non-acceptance, and naming defilements to dissolve their grip. Joseph offers a walking meditation exercise to observe the steady stream of light, quickly-passing thoughts that continuously reinforce self-view, setting the foundation for the next talk on freeing ourselves from these deeply conditioned patterns.*

I'd like to begin by referring back to something that Bart mentioned this morning. It's a phrase from the Buddhist discourse on mindfulness, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. There's one line in it which has a very interesting instruction, where the Buddha says, "Be mindful that 'there is a body' to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness."

Just that phrase—"be mindful that there is a body"—suggests that it could be used as a kind of mental label or note in the mind to remind us to come back to awareness of the body. I've been using that phrase in teaching now for quite a few years, and people have found it very helpful because we can frame the sitting this way: as we sit down and assume a comfortable but alert posture, we can simply begin with "there is a body," settling into that and using it as the framework for then becoming aware of whatever else arises.

For example, when we begin to open to the feeling of the breath, instead of necessarily narrowing the focus on the breath or zeroing in on it, we could hold the larger frame of "there is a body" and then become aware of the breath, the feeling of the breath arising within that larger frame. It's as if we're giving our mind, or creating, greater spaciousness—but that spaciousness includes awareness of whatever arises within it.

So we use the phrase "there is a body," we settle in, and then become mindful of everything that's arising within that framework: sounds, thoughts, or other sensations. We keep that larger framework, and you can experiment with times when perhaps you do zero in on the breath, or not.

Find a comfortable place, an alert meditative posture. Sit in the way that's most comfortable for you with respect to whether your eyes are closed or just slightly open with a downward gaze. Some techniques of meditation keep the eyes wide open. Generally, we don't do that in Vipassana, but it could be done. You can experiment with that as well and see what is most conducive to staying mindful, because that's the point of it all.

Settle back into a comfortable posture, maybe repeating the phrase in the mind: "there is a body." You can repeat that phrase throughout the sitting at different times. We settle into the feeling of the whole body, the sitting posture.

As Bart mentioned this morning, we settle in, relaxing the eyes, relaxing the jaw, relaxing the belly—because these are often places where we're holding. Soften the eyes, soften the jaw. Just as an aside, the jaw often relaxes if we place our tongue just behind the upper teeth, at the palate. I've found that this automatically relaxes the jaw. Something to play with. And relaxing the belly.

Within that framework, become aware of any sounds that may be appearing. One of the things you may notice as you settle in within this frame—"there is a body"—and then open to sounds, is that you may begin to have the experience that there's really no division between inside and outside. The feeling of the body and sounds are just all appearing in this open space of the mind.

Stay relaxed, not waiting for anything, not wanting anything. We simply settle back into that field—"there is a body"—aware of whatever sounds may appear and come and go. And when there are no sounds, being aware of the silence.

Within that framework, you may become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. There's no need to particularly zero in on the breath, although one could. But it might be interesting for a while to stay in the larger framework and simply be with the sensations of the body breathing in the context of "there is a body," keeping that larger frame.

As you feel the sensations of the body breathing, you may notice where in the body those sensations are felt most clearly. And occasionally, to the degree that it's helpful, you can repeat the phrase "there is a body." It just reminds us to settle back into that awareness, being mindful of whatever arises within that framework.

Sounds, the sensations of the body breathing. There may be other sensations in the body that appear. Be open to the feeling of those sensations—some pleasant, perhaps some unpleasant. We're just open to the experience of them within this framework: there is a body.

Also become aware of any thoughts or images that appear. See how alert you can be to the arising, to the appearance of thoughts or images in the mind, seeing how they too come and go, very much like sounds. Settling into the experience of "there is a body," perhaps using that phrase occasionally, and being mindful of whatever arises within that frame. Sounds come and go. The sensations of the body breathing. Other sensations that we may feel in the body. Thoughts or images. The key is being relaxed and alert at the same time.

When you're ready, you can slowly, gently open your eyes, and also then become mindful of seeing. Seeing is an underappreciated field for mindfulness, even though we're living largely in the world of what's being seen—for people who have functioning eyesight—and yet I think very often we're not mindful that we're seeing. But that's a whole other topic.

For today's topic, as some of you may know from the course description that was online, I just finished a three-month home retreat. The practice is very alive and vibrant for me in these days. And as always, this retreat highlighted the challenge that we face as lay practitioners living in the world: how can we integrate the Buddhist teachings on liberation, on enlightenment—the highest aspirations we might have—how can we integrate those teachings in the busyness, the samsaric nature of our life in the world? This is the great challenge for us.

In this talk, I'd like to jump into the deeper end of things. Some of the ideas and concepts will be familiar to some of you, and perhaps for others they may be new ideas, even challenging ones. I would suggest just taking it all in, seeing what's useful for you now, and if there are things you don't quite understand or are uncertain about, let them be seeds which in their own time may or may not germinate.

At first, the framework of understanding that I'm going to lay out may sound somewhat theoretical, abstract, or disconnected from the nitty-gritty of one's life. But if you can hang in there as I lay all of this out, I think you'll begin to see the tremendous practical applications of this particular teaching. It's not about Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha simply analyzed things, understood the nature of the mind and body and our interactions in the world with such clarity. He understood things on so many different levels, but they're all in the service of coming to the end of suffering. That's really what it's all about. And it has that kind of practical implication for us in our lives.

So often our inquiries—we might say our spiritual inquiries, perhaps even before we knew anything about Buddhism—revolve around the question: who am I? This is a basic existential question. It may be a really conscious reflection, or it may just be a background, almost subliminal motivation in our searching. Who am I?

I had a very striking experience of that. This goes back many years, when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I was about twenty-one years old, with all the seeking and searching and angst of being that age. I remember one time I was teaching at this school in Bangkok. I was in my room, looking in the mirror, and just desperately wanting to know: who's behind what I'm seeing? The question was very important and meaningful for me, even though at that time I had no idea how to investigate it.

But this "who"—who am I—can actually be misleading as the core question of our inquiry. Because just in that way of formulating it, "who am I," it's already predicating the idea of a self, a being, someone, some unchanging core self behind all our experience, who's at the center of our lives. Just the word "who" already has that implication. I think it sets us off in the wrong direction for the most part. There's a better question that would serve us, but before I get to that, a little sidebar.

Conventionally speaking, of course we can use that language. If somebody asks you, "Who's coming to dinner?" they're not interested in a deep philosophical analysis of mind factors and body elements. "Carrie's coming to dinner." Conventionally speaking, this language is fine. But from a Dharma perspective, if it's not rightly understood, this view of "who," this imaginary who, the view of self, is really at the core, at the center of

the suffering in our lives. So even though we use that language conventionally, which is fine, from a Dharma perspective we can dig deeper. We can get underneath that to really see what's going on.

This is really important, and it was expressed beautifully by a writer named Wei Wu Wei. He was a European who lived for a long time in Hong Kong and had some kind of realization—his books are filled with little stories and aphorisms that highlight the understanding of selflessness. Here is one of his little aphorisms: "Being attached to the view of self is like a dog barking up a tree that isn't there."

For most of us, this is our lives. We're barking up a tree that isn't there.

So the question is, when are we going to stop barking? Well, we can stop barking when we understand. We go from the "who" to the "what." What am I, rather than who am I? And that begins to open us up to a whole profound investigation of the nature of this mind and body without it being predicated beforehand on the notion of a self or an "I" or some being. That's why this change of language can be very impactful in our inquiry.

So what are we? What are the building blocks of all our experience? And then, once we understand what the building blocks are, the next very important question is: What do we build with them? What do we do? What kind of reality do we construct for ourselves out of the basic building blocks of our experience? This is a lot of what I want to go into in this talk.

So what is the "what"? That's the question. The Buddha offered some very simple ways of understanding the basic elements of our experience. And then, with somewhat more complexity, he described the myriad things we do with these building blocks. Some of these things lead to more suffering in our lives, more stress; and some of the things we do with these building blocks lead to greater ease and greater freedom. Understanding things on this deeper level really has tremendous implications for how we're living and how we're experiencing life.

There is one discourse of the Buddha which has a very bold title. The title of the discourse is "The All." And the Buddha describes "the All" in like a few sentences—or one long sentence. It's quite remarkable that he encapsulated the All in this very short little discourse. So what is the All? The eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile sensations, and the mind and all mental activities—thoughts, emotions, different mind states. This is the All. And he challenged his audience: Can anyone express something in their experience that's outside of these six things?

It's quite amazing. We think our lives are so complicated, but really only six things are ever happening. It's sights or sounds or smells or tastes or sensations or some kind of mental activity. Moment after moment, we're just experiencing these six things.

The image that sometimes comes to mind is that our life is like a six-piece chamber orchestra. It's just six different instruments playing and interrelating with one another. That's all that's happening—this chamber orchestra of the six senses. And in Buddhism, the mind is included as the sixth sense. These six senses, this chamber orchestra, is playing the music of our lives. So what kind of music are we creating?

But here is where it gets interesting and a little more complex. Because how the mind is relating to these six experiences, how we're relating, becomes itself part of the unfolding of our lives. It's not only recognizing these six things, but actually going deeper into the mental field to see: How is the mind—and by mind, it also includes heart, the heart-mind—how is this heart-mind relating to these different sense impressions? And of course, as we know, there can be a lot of complexity in how we relate to our experience.

The Buddha talked of three powerfully conditioned tendencies in the mind. In Pali, which is the language a lot of the Buddhist texts are in, an ancient Indian language, it's called *papañca*. Papañca means the proliferating tendencies of mind—those ways of relating to things that just proliferate a whole world of interaction. They're very powerful forces, basic forces in the mind that are playing out all the time, but that mostly we're unaware of. Unless we're really looking carefully at how things are unfolding and have this conceptual framework to begin with, we probably wouldn't even know how to differentiate these three proliferating tendencies.

In this talk, I wanted to go a little deeper and really explore what these three proliferating tendencies are and how they work. Because it's this papañca, this proliferation in the mind, which is both rooted in and further strengthens the sense of self. These tendencies play a very critical role in how the notion of self, the idea, the concept of self, is both created and strengthened and embedded in our life stream.

So, the three papañca.

The three proliferating tendencies are these: the first is craving, the second is conceit, and the third is wrong view. I'll be talking about each one of these in turn.

To start with a very simple explanation: as we know, craving is something we're all familiar with. It's that wanting or desire or thirsting for something. And it's rooted in the sense of mine, of belonging to me. We want things to belong to us, or we take them to be ours.

Let me share one little story which shows both this craving for wanting things to be mine and also the rapidity of the proliferating tendency. It's a rather ridiculous story, but it's true. I was on retreat at the Forest Refuge, and I'd been there for some time. My practice felt like it was really deepening, and I was reflecting on the Four Noble Truths. As many of you know, there's the truth of suffering, dukkha; the cause of it, which is craving; the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving; and the path.

I was thinking about this and said, "Yeah, the end of suffering is the end of craving." So I said to myself, "Joseph, just stop craving. Stop wanting. Come to the end of suffering." It seemed so simple. And then immediately—maybe ten seconds after I had that thought, "just stop craving"—I noticed I was wearing my favorite meditation sweatshirt. We all probably have our little meditative clothing, and I have a favorite sweatshirt. Every time I'm on retreat, this is what I wear.

Going from "yeah, just stop craving," within about thirty seconds I started imagining I'd like to get this sweatshirt in a lot of different colors, because the one I have is only gray. My mind started proliferating, and within a minute or so I just had to laugh at myself. But that's what proliferation means—we have a thought and it just expands into our whole world. So that's craving, based or rooted in the sense of mine, of belonging to me, of wanting something to belong to me.

The second of the tendencies is conceit. This is the English translation of the Pali word *mana*. I want to give the Pali words for some of these terms because sometimes, when I'm recognizing different forces in the mind, I like to use the Pali word. For me, it depersonalizes the experience. The Pali word doesn't carry the same baggage, you might say, that certain English words might carry. So that's why I offer this basic Pali terminology—just to become a little familiar with it.

Conceit is the English translation of *mana*, and it means something a little different than how we use the word conceit in English. In English, when we say somebody's conceited, we think they're very full of themselves and believe they're better than others. That's one small aspect of what's meant by *mana*. But more fundamentally, *mana* is the felt sense or felt impression of "I am." It's "I am this"—that's the conceit. When I looked up conceit in the dictionary, I found that conceit can also mean simply the idea or belief about something. So conceit here means that feeling of "I am."

In this regard, years ago I saw an ad for a t-shirt in the New York Times. The logo on the shirt simply said: "Me, me, me." That's an expression of *mana*—"I am, I'm here."

So craving is that thirst for something rooted in mine or belonging to me. Conceit is that deeply conditioned feeling which we all have of "I am."

And then the third of the proliferating tendencies is wrong view. Wrong view within the Buddhist context is the view or belief in some self—the belief or idea of an unchanging core being that somehow is within us or is us. This belief in self, as we all know, is simply how the world and people commonly understand themselves. This is, in a way, the commonsense understanding of who we are—of course there's a self, of course there's a me.

But the Buddha—and this is where the teachings are in some way very radical and sometimes challenging—the Buddha challenges these conventional beliefs. He's saying that wrong view is holding or being attached to this view of self.

In this and in later talks, I'm going to explore this a little bit more. But I wanted to just give this basic outline of the papañca, the three proliferating tendencies of the mind: craving, conceit, and wrong view.

In the Buddhist teachings, these three are usually expressed in what is kind of a stock phrase that you find throughout the different discourses when the Buddha is talking about the workings of this papañca. It's a very simple set of phrases: "This is mine. This I am. This is myself." Those phrases just encapsulate these three papañca. "This is mine" is craving. "This I am" is conceit. "This is myself" is wrong view.

It's helpful to distinguish among these tendencies because until we've really applied the conceptual framework directly and investigated practically in our own experience, we might have some basic conceptual understanding, but there may not be a refined differentiation between them. So I just want to explore that a little bit so we can perhaps more clearly see what each is and the difference among them.

It's important to do this. And the reason I wanted to devote both talks during this course to this topic is because these three tendencies, in different ways and mostly unknowingly—unless we really learn how to pay attention to them—are the ways we construct and strengthen the sense of self in our lives. These tendencies are at work a lot of the time, which I will go into a bit more. They are working. They're like the background motor of our lives. And if we're not aware of them, if we're not aware of how they're working, all the time they're strengthening, they're constructing and strengthening this sense of self.

The reason this is so important was expressed by the great Tibetan master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He died some years ago. He was a great master really of the last century. This is what he wrote: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in samsara for countless past lifetimes. This idea of an enduring self is the very

thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others too."

So this is not just an intellectual exercise. This goes to the very heart, to the very root of what causes so much suffering for ourselves and others—this core notion of self.

We can begin to explore all of this in some of the very ordinary experiences of our lives. We don't have to be in some deep meditative state to begin to understand how all of this is working. We can begin to understand it and understand exactly what craving is, based on "mine" and "belonging to me," and what conceit is, based on "I am," this "I am-ing." We can really see this at work in how we understand the relationship we have to the body.

For example, in considering the body, we probably would not say, "I am the leg," or "the leg is me." We would say, "my leg," as if the leg is something that belongs to a me. So that's the first papañca—"mine," "belonging to me"—and then all the craving that can arise with things that belong to us. We want it to be this way or that way. There's a lot of desire that comes for things that belong to us.

And then we might extend that inquiry into how we feel about the whole body, how we relate to the whole body. When I was thinking about this in working on this talk, I thought, well, at first people might well think, "I am the body." What am I? I'm the body, at least in part. But then on further reflection, I was thinking about an experience I had, and I think it's very common to people as they get older, as they age. Because as we age, for myself and I think commonly, the feeling "I am" hasn't really changed. Even as we see the body so visibly change—the gray hair and the wrinkles and whatever, the whole aging process—we see the body changing, but don't you have that sense often? How did this happen? I feel the same. It's the same "I am," you know, thirty years ago.

So this begins to give an indication that even the way we relate to the whole body is not so much the conceit "I am," but rather "mine." The body belongs to me. And again, when we consider the body in this way—the body belongs to me—so many different desires and cravings come about. How many of our desires and cravings are rooted in or coming from our experience of the body? The body belongs to me, the body is mine, and therefore I want this and this, and I want it to be like that.

So this is common. This is just the ordinary experiences of our lives. An extreme version of this, and the way we are usually relating to the body as being "mine," was expressed in one ad I saw in some magazine, advertising something desirable, I guess.

And, you know, it was this beautiful setting, and the caption was—there were people in the ad—and the caption read, "I don't let anything stand in the way of my pleasure." As if this is what we should aim for. This is what we should strive for. But it indicates a basic energy, even though that's an extreme version. This motivation in our lives may express itself in much more subtle fashion, not so dramatic.

But it points to something very interesting, a Dharma point well worth investigating, because there's a certain confusion that keeps reinforcing and strengthening the force of desire and craving in our lives. And that is: unexamined, we often equate desire and pleasure. Another ad I once saw, the caption was, "Increase your desire." Good Buddhist instruction! But this is part of our world, and that's the message we're constantly receiving, because it equates desire with pleasure itself. And we don't usually pay careful enough attention to times of desire to see the suffering embedded in it.

A phrase I've been using lately is "migraines of desire." Because like with a migraine, it's such a compelling force in the experience that just pushes us to relieve it. But it's suffering—migraine is suffering. Desire is like a migraine that's pushing us to get something. So it would be very helpful to begin to see the suffering embedded in desire. It might make it a little less attractive to us.

A practical way of doing this, which I've seen a lot in my own meditation and talked about extensively on meditation retreats—this could be done anytime, whether in meditation or not, but it's particularly visible or noticeable when we're in formal meditation. Just sit in your next sitting. Be watchful for the next time desire arises. Maybe it'll be in that sitting or the following one, but it probably won't be too long before some desire arises in the mind.

If you can be mindful, if you can really catch the arising—"Oh, there's desire in the mind"—and just be with it and feel what it's like to have the desire, then notice what it's like when the desire ends, which it always will. It'll be there for however long it's there. This is why sitting is particularly helpful, because we're not doing anything. We're not acting on it. We're just sitting with it and feeling it. With it, with it, and then at a certain point it goes. Notice how it feels when the desire leaves. My experience is it always feels like a huge relief. It feels like the mind, the heart is being let out of the grip of something. The desire is the grip.

But normally we don't see it, because on a more superficial level we're equating the desire with some kind of pleasure—the anticipated pleasure of getting whatever it is we desire—but not seeing the migraine aspect of the desire itself. So this would be very helpful to really see for oneself. This is an application of these teachings. We're not just

listening and hearing and maybe understanding to whatever extent we do on an intellectual, conceptual level. All of these teachings are to be applied as a basis for our own investigation.

And of course, we also take to be mine or belonging to me—rooted in different kinds of craving—not only things related to the body, but all of our minds. My thoughts, my feelings, my anger, my happiness. It's all belonging to me. You see how deeply rooted this way of relating to things is in our lives. This is not superficial conditioning. This is right down there in the roots of how we're living.

The whole point of the Buddhist teaching is to see: what are the ways in which we live and relate to experience that create more suffering? And what are the possibilities for freedom? That's what all of this is about.

I was thinking about this deeply rooted sense of possessiveness, of mine and belonging to me. The image that came to mind was of a bunch of kids playing with some toys. Maybe at some point one of the parents says to one of the kids, "Share the toys, share the toys with others." And occasionally there might come up against that heartfelt wail: "But it's mine!" And it's so young. This is very young. But it's deep.

And so our practice is really to get in there with it all and to see, just in the ordinary unfolding of our lives, how impactful these proliferating tendencies are. This is not some occasional thing that happens from time to time. They're driving forces in our lives. So we need to really explore and investigate.

The Buddha also talked about a more subtle kind of craving. He called it craving for becoming. When we believe this mind and body to be mine, then all kinds of cravings will arise for it to become like this or that, in whatever way. Instead of being totally settled back in things just as they are, there's often this leaning into the unfolding process of our lives. Instead of being settled and at rest and really complete in each moment, this craving for becoming has us leaning into how things are unfolding, rooted in craving, rooted in wanting.

One way of seeing this, which is very obvious in meditation, has to do with expectation. We may think we have no expectations, but we usually do. They may be a little hidden at first, but a good signal for this—and one that provides its own interesting insight—is to pay attention to those times in our practice and in our lives when we're struggling with something, when things are not flowing easily and we're just caught in some kind of struggle.

Usually we see this as a problem. It's not pleasant. The struggle is a kind of suffering. But more usefully, it's helpful to see struggle as a very important feedback rather than being a problem. Because struggle means just one thing: it means something is happening in our experience that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. It's so simple. I just love the teachings because once one sees a lot of these things, in retrospect, they become so obvious. But of course, until we see them, we struggle.

Just for example, when you're struggling in your meditation practice—sitting and maybe your intention is to be with the breath, but then there's a lot of pain or discomfort in the body, or just a lot of thinking, lots and lots of thinking. We're trying to be with the breath, but the discomfort or the thinking keeps distracting us, and so we're in this struggle between the two. If we understand struggle as feedback, we ask the question, "Oh, what am I not accepting?" Oh, I'm not accepting the fact that there's discomfort in the body. Can I settle back and relax and open to it? Just be with it. At that point, it's not the breath that we should be with. It's to be with what's presenting itself, which in this case might be discomfort or even a lot of thoughts. Some sittings, for whatever reason, might just be a lot of thinking. Instead of struggling with that, let the struggle be the indication: "Oh, I'm not accepting this. I'm not settled." So we could just make a big frame, settle back, and become aware—oh, mind thinking, mind thinking. We can be mindful of that, and the struggle is gone. It might be different emotions. Okay.

So all of this is pointing to something very important. This whole discussion about craving, whether it's craving for the body to be a certain way or the craving for becoming in the way I described—the whole field of craving is rooted in one, we could almost say, hardwired tendency in our being. So it's very powerful. Desiring, craving is not a superficial conditioning; it goes really deep. And the root of it is that we want what's pleasant and we want to avoid what's unpleasant.

For most people, of course, this seems obvious. Well, of course—why shouldn't I want what's pleasant and avoid what's unpleasant? It just feels like, yes, this is normal, this is how it should be. The problem is that we can't control it. In all of our lives, we cannot completely control it, or even for the most part control it. Life is made up of this mix of pleasant and unpleasant. And if we're driven by this desire for the pleasant and desire to avoid the unpleasant, we are in a constant state of either defensiveness, trying to protect ourselves from what's unpleasant, or this obsessive energy of wanting or craving or becoming.

So it's really important to see this. The Buddha had very strong words about this, which whenever I hear this particular teaching, it kind of makes me sit up straight. He said that as long as there's desire for the pleasant, or attachment to the pleasant, and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. That's a very powerful statement because it really points to what we need to practice, which is settling back with greater equanimity.

It doesn't mean we don't experience what's pleasant. But on the same token, it doesn't mean we don't experience what's unpleasant. It means that we have enough inner strength and resilience and equanimity just to settle back.

And then being aware of whatever arises within it. Some things will be pleasant, some things will be unpleasant. Can we just be with it? Can we experience unpleasantness? Fine. Pleasantness? Fine. So we're fully engaged. It's not a disengagement, but an evenness, a non-reactivity.

Now, this doesn't mean that in this place of openness and equanimity we don't respond to things appropriately. Of course we do. If your hand is on fire—unpleasant, unpleasant—no, put it out, take it out. This is just one example of a whole world of interactions we have. It doesn't mean that we don't respond. Rather, it means: what is driving the response? Is it just the reactivity of craving this or that? Or is it discernment? Is it really the operation of wisdom in our lives? And so the mind, even as it's responding—we take the hand out of the fire, we're responding to that situation—but the mind can be at peace with that, not caught up in great reactivity of mind. This is part of our practice: enlarging our capacity to hold this whole range of experience that comes to us as human beings in this life.

I've talked quite a lot now about the first aspect of papañca, which is craving born from this notion of "mine" or "belonging to me." The workings of the second aspect of papañca, of these proliferating tendencies, is conceit. These are a little more subtle and in some ways more pervasive.

Although conceit—*māna* within the Buddhist framework—very often refers to the comparing mind (I'm better than, I'm equal to, I'm less than), it also manifests as thoughts of "I am" over time. This is really interesting because it's a good part of our lives. What this means is the sense of not only "I am this now," but "I was"—I was this or that in the past, or I will be this or that in the future.

Just reflect for a moment. You'll probably know this from your meditation experience, but I'm going to speak more about how even more pervasive it is than that. How much time is spent in our minds in past and future? A huge amount of time. Just re-

membering things, memories, planning, imagining. Our minds are doing this all the time, and we're not seeing that in doing this, it is a manifestation of the conceit "I am." We are strengthening the "I am-ness," or "I am-ing." Not only in this moment, in relationship to what's happening, comparing ourselves with others, but over time—in the past, present, future. To the degree that we're lost, which we often are, in thoughts of past and future, unknowingly we are strengthening this conceit, this "I am."

Most generally, the conceit of *māna*, this underlying impression that we carry throughout the day of "I am-ness"—it's very often just the underlying backdrop to our whole days. I'm walking, I'm eating, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. We're not thinking that explicitly, but at least in my experience, there's often a felt sense that's there as the underlying understanding of what's happening. Yeah, I am, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. All of this is so ordinary that usually we don't take the time to investigate: what exactly is the "I" that we're talking about? Even though it's so pervasive and so common in how we are living our lives—I'm doing this, I'm doing that, I'm going here, I'm going there—how often do we actually stop and ask: well, what is the "I"? What is this thing that is running my life?

This is where the teachings and the meditation and the practice of mindfulness become the key to unlock this door. I'd like to give just a couple of examples of this. The first is a very simple one which illustrates the proliferating aspect of conceit and just how it can create whole worlds. The second example is about something a little more impactful in terms of the actual suffering in our lives.

So the first example also happened on this recent retreat. I was walking outside and it was a particularly cold day—freezing cold. I'm doing walking meditation and I'm so cold. That was my sense of it: "I'm so cold."

And although this could be a convenient way of communicating—if somebody said, "How are you feeling?" and you replied, "Oh, I feel so cold"—that would be fine. But that's just convention. A more fruitful investigation of the experience would be to get underneath that conceit. "I am so cold." Okay, what are the building blocks here? Going to: "Oh, there is coldness. Unpleasant." Where we just get to the basic elements of the experience.

But instead of that simple awareness—I finally came to that—my first response, and this just shows the proliferating nature of conceit: I'm out there walking, it's freezing cold, "I'm so cold," and immediately my mind went to fantasies of being on retreat in Hawaii, walking on the beach under the palm trees with warm breezes. I spent not that

long—long enough, maybe a few minutes—just lost in this mind-created world. Hawaii is a long way from Barry, Massachusetts, but it was right there in my mind. You see how this conceit "I am" just led to this whole proliferation of a mind-created world.

This happens a lot. And even when it's not in and of itself painful or some kind of suffering, it's deluded, because it is a mind-created world that we're living in. It's not actually happening, except as thoughts and images in the mind. So we want to see it.

But perhaps a more impactful level of understanding this conceit "I am"—and again, I saw this on retreat. I really love coming and doing this course right after retreat, because when I'm on retreat I get so fascinated by the looking and understanding. Every once in a while we get an insight into a particular kind of suffering and then see, okay, where's the release in this?

This is an example of that happening when I was on retreat. I don't remember all the details exactly, but it was something about being on retreat—I'd been there maybe for a month or so—and then I just spent some amount of time, maybe half an hour, an hour, just frittering away some time. That's all it was. I can't even remember what I was doing. But then when I started reflecting about being on retreat and the basic intention for being there, I saw that I really started getting down on myself. "Joseph, why are you wasting all this time?" There was just a lot of self-judgment and self-criticism in this negative way. I felt quite contracted, in a down mood. It didn't feel good.

But then wisdom came to the rescue, for which I was very grateful. I realized that all these thoughts—the self-critical thoughts, the self-judgmental thoughts—were all rooted in conceit. I was just "I am"-ing in this negative way, strengthening this whole sense of "I am-ness" through these thoughts. It was amazing. As soon as I could see and name the defilement—conceit, *māna*—as soon as I saw what was happening, it took me out of this whole story of myself that I had created, with the attendant down mood and not feeling great about myself. As soon as I thought, "Oh, this is just *māna*, this is just conceit, 'I am'-ing in a negative way rather than in an inflated way," the whole thing disappeared. I was just back right in the moment with whatever was happening.

There's an important point here which we can generalize from. When we're in some state of suffering or discontent and we can name the particular defilement in the mind that's causing the suffering or causing the discontent—in this case it was conceit, sometimes it might be craving or wanting—we name it. We say, "Oh, that's just craving."

When we name and see the defilement, immediately it can extricate us from this enmeshment in the story of ourselves that we've created. This is a very liberating aspect of mindfulness, but it means coming out of the enchantment of the story and really see-

ing underneath—what is the defilement that's creating this story? We're getting to the root of it, to the cause of it. And as soon as we become mindful of that, it's much easier to see the impersonality of it. The *mana*, the conceit—even though it's all about "I am"—the *mana* itself is selfless. We see the impersonality of the defilements, and this helps us see them and be with them with mindfulness and equanimity. In that mindfulness, they disappear.

In the Buddhist discourses, very often when practitioners are seeing some defilement in the mind, the expression will be, "Mara, I see you"—Mara being the embodiment of ignorance and delusion. As soon as the practitioner says, "Mara, I see you," Mara just disappears. That's actually what happens. It's in the seeing of the defilements that we can let go of them. This is a very practical application of all these teachings, of being mindful of these *papañcas*, of craving, of conceit.

It is interesting to notice just how seductive the stories we have about ourselves are. Sometimes the stories are farces, sometimes they're tragedies—all kinds of stories. But in all of them, we are the star. We are the center, even when in deepest suffering or greatest delight. At the center of it all is the "I," the "I am." It's very helpful to get underneath the story, back to the basic building blocks of our experience.

There's one famous sutta called the Bahiya Discourse, which encapsulates this teaching about coming back to the basic elements of experience—the building blocks of our life. There's a whole backstory to it, but the essence is this: A man named Bahiya came to the Buddha while the Buddha was on alms round and said, "Please teach me." He had great urgency. At first the Buddha said, "Wait till I finish alms round, I'll go back to the monastery and give the teaching." But Bahiya was very insistent. Given that the Buddha was standing in the middle of the road with his alms bowl, he gave a very pithy teaching:

"In the seen, there is just what is seen. In the heard, there is just what is heard. In the sensed—that is smell, taste, and touch—there is only what is sensed. In the thought, there is only what is thought."

So simple, but profound, because it gets us right back to the direct experience of the impersonal building blocks of our whole lives. The mind is freed from the proliferation of story. We just come back: in the seen, just the seen; in the heard, just the heard; in the sensed, just the sensed; in the thought, just the thought.

As my teacher Munindraji said, "It's simple but not easy." I came across a quote from the Indian poet and philosopher Tagore: "It's very simple to be happy. But it's very difficult to be simple." In some way, we can think of our whole practice as learning simplicity, extricating ourselves from this seduction of mental proliferation based on craving, conceit, and wrong view.

There's one other aspect of conceit I want to mention, because it has a tremendous effect on our lives and our relationships. It's so common and quite pervasive: the conceit of comparing ourselves with others, how we evaluate ourselves in relation to some other person or to an idealized presentation of some other being. A good part of our consumer society is all about this. We have advertising showing these perfect beings enjoying perfect happiness with some product, with the implication that if we get that product, we will share in their happiness. On one hand, we can say it's ridiculous. However, this goes deep in us, and we can see it perhaps in more immediate and more frequent ways.

This would be a really helpful experiment to make. Just watch in your interactions with other people—either people you know well or people you don't know well. Sometimes these projections happen even more with those we don't know. Simply see if within oneself there's almost an automatic evaluation of oneself relative to them. Better than, equal to, less than. It could be about anything. It could be about how we look, or about intelligence, or creativity—even about how mindful we are.

On one retreat, I remember I was in the dining room at IMS. It's so ridiculous what the mind can do. I was there being very mindful, of course, with all these judgments about this one person who I was looking at who didn't seem mindful at all. I was in kind of a superior position—"they're not being mindful"—completely missing that in that comparing, I wasn't being mindful at all either. But that was the working of conceit, just that almost automatic comparing that we do and evaluating ourselves in relationship to others.

This is really a source of suffering in our lives. And in some significant way, it closes our hearts to others. We're not just open and being with them and ourselves just as we are, without this evaluation. But when conceit, the proliferation of conceit, operates—and it does often, and we want to see how often it comes—then we can begin to see the impact of it in these very real life situations of our relationships.

So the last of the proliferating tendencies: we have craving, we have conceit, and the last of them is wrong view. Wrong view in the Buddhist sense is the very deeply conditioned belief that there is a self. This is how we commonly understand things, so this is

not an aberrant happening. This is the common understanding—of course there's a self, of course there's a me. This is where the teachings can be very challenging to our conventional way of understanding things.

When we hold this belief, which most people do, it's kind of the bedrock of how we understand what's going on—this belief in the self. As I said earlier, this belief that there's some core unchanging being located somewhere or other that is who and what I am. We don't quite know what it is, which is interesting. But even not quite knowing what it is, we believe it to be the center of our existence.

The Buddha is really urging us and challenging us to investigate this. Because if we don't, we are just going to continue proliferating in all of these ways—through craving, conceit, and wrong view, this notion of self. The Buddha had very direct words about wrong view. He said there's nothing as harmful to us as wrong view. Because based on wrong view, based on this view of self, it's leading us in the wrong direction. It's like everything we do—instead of heading towards liberation, towards greater freedom, towards greater ease—if it's rooted in this belief in self, it's just leading to more difficulty and to more suffering in our lives. That's why the Buddha said there's nothing more dangerous than wrong view.

The teachings are all about understanding this. We could say coming to right view—really coming to understand through mindfulness and through our practice the workings of all these proliferating tendencies rooted in self and strengthening self. If we can see them operating more clearly—and they are operating in our lives extensively—that's the path to greater freedom. That's the path to greater ease.

So hopefully you've gotten some idea of these three proliferating tendencies. I'd like to give you a parting exercise, which I hope you'll do before our next meeting. This particular exercise will give you a very immediate, direct experience of how pervasive these *papañca* are, these proliferating tendencies are. They're not just occasional things. They are the matrix, really, of how we're living. So we want to understand. We want to see them.

This is the exercise: Take some time—it might be just five minutes, ten minutes. You might do it going for a walk, but it could be doing anything. I found it particularly helpful going for a walk because the physical activity was very simple. Going for a walk, trying to be mindful—I'm not talking about necessarily this super slow, creeping mindfulness walk, but just taking a normal walk while trying to be mindful of the body moving. Then for these five or ten minutes, as you're walking and being more or less mindful,

have the intention to notice the quickly passing thoughts that go through the mind. I think you'll see that there's a pretty steady stream of them. The problem is that most of them are quite light.

They're not necessarily disturbing. They're not necessarily any big drama. But they could be some memory of the past or some planning for the future—something or other reinforcing these three papañca, right? But not necessarily in a way that wakes us up to them.

What I found is I was just amazed at how frequently these thoughts come, and they don't necessarily even last long—maybe thirty seconds or a minute or fifteen seconds. They can be quick, they can be light, and therefore unnoticed. But all the while, they are strengthening the sense of self through these three proliferating tendencies. We might just have some desire for something, or even some sense of "I'm walking"—in one way or another, these quickly passing thoughts are just strengthening these three tendencies.

So first, it's important to see this so we can appreciate the importance of investigating all of it. It's not something to ignore. We can see not only how pervasive it is, but also how, in one way or another, these thoughts are strengthening this wrong view of self.

To the degree that as these thoughts come we're actually aware of them as thinking—rather than lost in them, lost in the dream of them for that particular few minutes—in the seeing of them, we're actually weakening the sense of self. We're seeing, "Oh, this is just a passing thought." And we're not lost in the story of it, in the creation of self in it. We begin to reframe all experiences as not mine, not I, not myself. That's going to be the theme of the next talk.

The big question remains: given all this conditioning power of these proliferating tendencies, how do we free ourselves? How do we work with it in a way that leads to liberation? This will be the subject of the next talk.

CHAPTER 59

# Opening Session

Joseph Goldstein · 1h35

> *This opening session of the retreat "Insight Meditation and the Forces at Play in Our Lives" begins with welcome addresses from the teaching team—Joseph Goldstein, Roxanne Dault, Sabrah Williams, and Bart Van Melik—who acknowledge the indigenous peoples of the lands they're practicing on and extend an inclusive welcome to practitioners of all backgrounds and identities.*
>
> *Bart Van Melik then guides participants in establishing a foundation for home retreat practice, emphasizing two essential instructions: pause and welcome. Through guided meditation, he helps practitioners identify their "anchor" experiences—whether sounds, breath, or bodily sensations—that can support continuous mindfulness throughout daily activities. He introduces walking meditation and movement practice as extensions of formal sitting, drawing on Ajahn Chah's teaching to "make the practice the shape of a circle" with continuous, timeless mindfulness.*
>
> *The teaching explores the traditional Three Refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) as sources of protection and support. Taking refuge in Buddha means connecting with kindness, awareness, and our potential to awaken; refuge in Dhamma involves understanding natural laws like impermanence (anicca) and finding wisdom in nature; refuge in Saṅgha recognizes our inescapable interconnection with community. Bart also introduces the Five Precepts as practices of compassion—protecting life, practicing generosity, responsible conduct, wise speech, and mindful consumption—offering them as supports for retreat practice within the complexity of home life.*

Welcome everyone to this online retreat. I'm grateful for the technology that makes it possible for people to join in from so many different places. My name is Joseph Goldstein, and as most of you probably know, I've been involved with IMS from the very beginning.

Let me give a brief overview of what we have in mind for this retreat. The Buddha gave very comprehensive teachings about how to live in accordance with the Dharma—that is, to live in a way that brings greater happiness and ease in our lives. These teachings cover a wide range, from how to live more comfortably and easefully in the world and the kind of happiness that comes from that, to the happiness that comes from developing concentration and developing insight, all the way to the happiness of enlightenment, of awakening.

During these few days, my colleagues and I will be touching on this whole range of offerings, from how to be living in the world more easily to the potential for the development of insight and for developing the possibility of liberation in our lives.

For my part in the retreat, I'll be giving two talks and two question and response sessions. We've decided to change the name from "question and answer" to "question and response"—and you can decide for yourselves whether the question really got answered or not. But we'll do our best.

In the first talk, I really want to lay out in some detail and some depth the underlying causes for suffering in our lives, for distress, for inner conflict. So the first talk is going to lay out the problem in some depth, and the second talk is going to address the remedy for that problem—that is, how we can work with the forces that cause suffering in a way that frees us. That's my general plan for this retreat.

And now I'd like to have my colleagues introduce themselves so you get a chance to hear their voices as we go forward. So again, welcome.

---

Thank you, Joseph. Hi, everyone. I'm Roxanne Do. I'm currently in Montreal, in unceded territory of a gathering of many First Nations I want to acknowledge as we start, including the Kenyakihaga, the Mohawk, the Wendat, the Abenaki, and my own ancestors, the Algonquin Anishinaabe. So welcoming us all on this land of gathering.

I also want to acknowledge the Nipmuc people where IMS is situated, honoring their place and being custodians of this land and water, and thanking them for being of support as we practice. Perhaps in the next months or years, we can return to IMS, so honoring those people there.

I'm very happy to be with all of you as we dive into this practice this weekend. I'm a French-Canadian and a guiding teacher at True North Insight here in Canada. I've practiced mainly under the lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw instruction, so I'm offering deep bows today to people in Burma who need peace and freedom right now.

As we acknowledge this lineage, I also want to offer deep bows to all the protectors of the Dhamma for all those 2,600 years of practice, of oral tradition that has come to us on this day in 2021. I bow to all the Asian countries that supported the unfolding of the Dhamma—people in India, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, China—all Asian countries and all Asian Americans who brought this practice here to the West in many ways on this continent. Thank you all, as we are touched by the Dhamma in these days.

All the teachers here want to welcome you fully with care and deep appreciation. We welcome all bodies of all abilities, all shapes, sizes, ages—bodies with challenges that are visible or invisible. We want to make sure that we welcome all experience, which might mean some pain in the body or some comfort at times. Allowing all of this to be fully welcomed as we practice in the next few days.

We also welcome all bodies of different race, ethnicity, and culture—queer bodies, trans and cis bodies—welcoming all the gender spectrum and diverse identities you might have: non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, two-spirit. We welcome all various sexualities, whether straight, queer, pansexual, asexual, or perhaps a label that doesn't quite fit. All are fully welcome here.

Welcome also to people of all classes, religions, all languages. Just here on this teaching team, we have different languages being expressed that you might hear in our accents, with all levels of fluency that might entail for all of us. All of us are fully welcome, whether we were born here on this land, or perhaps our ancestors or parents came here for the first time, or perhaps we're listening from Africa or India or Europe. Some of us are on the other side of the ocean. We want to make sure that everybody really feels welcome for the next few days.

That also means welcoming this body with the range of emotions that might arise. Can we allow the full potential of this heart to really feel supported in the next few days? So a deep welcome to everyone.

My practice these days is really being moved by this potential to free our hearts in all conditions. I invite a sense of courage, trust in the practice, and confidence on this path. I'm going to be offering different talks on this deep intention: Can we have trust, and can we show up to our experience fully?

I'll be giving two talks and also offering some guided meditation around this practice of the heart of metta, loving-kindness, so we can actually support what is needed in each moment fully. I'm wishing you all an easeful and fruitful retreat and gathering, honoring everyone fully wherever we are.

Thank you, Roxanne. So good to be here with you all. We can't see you or your faces, so I'm just taking a moment to feel you out there, all of you joining us in this space. I'm calling in from Portland, Maine, formerly land of the Abenaki. I'll be offering movement for you each day.

Just to tell you a bit about myself: I was born in San Francisco, grew up there, and spent many years in New York before moving to IMS, where I spent six years in Barre, Massachusetts as a cook. I started offering movement there and recently moved here to Portland, Maine, where I'm now working for a collective of healers. I identify as mixed race, Mexican and white, and as a cisgender woman.

The practice I'll offer is an hour long, a gentle practice that should be accessible to most bodies and most ages. I'm really aiming for that. It's a mixture of yoga, qigong, and intuitive movement, and is really designed to loosen and soften the body after long hours of sitting, and also to bring us into the body, into a finer listening to the body, into relationship with the body, into attunement with the body. My intention in practice these days is really about coming into relationship—with my body, with the earth, with others around me. I look forward to spending time doing that with you during practice.

Thank you, Sabrah. Thank you, Roxanne and Joseph for being on this wonderful team. My name is Bart Van Melik, and I'm in a very special place that I'm zooming in from—a trailer in a campground. I'm in my bedroom, zooming in from the Netherlands, which is my home country. Usually I'm based in New York, but in the summers we have the opportunity to come to the Netherlands and spend time in this trailer.

Last summer, my wife and our seven-year-old son, whom I'm living with, found out that in the Netherlands it would be possible for a seven-year-old to go to in-person schooling. We decided to stay longer, and so I've been in this little teeny tiny trailer now for ten months.

And this is what this retreat will be about. Your home and the messiness of it all—whether it's in a trailer, whether it's in the kitchen, wherever you are—that's going to be your temple. Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Zen teacher from Vietnam, says this line: there is no enlightenment outside of daily living. This will be our temple.

I really want to share with you that we still call this time a retreat. And although it will be different from retreating as you would usually think of it in the forest of Massachusetts, even in the messiness of wherever you are right now, it's possible to retreat. These formal sessions that you can join—or, because of time differences, watch later—are moments when you can step away from daily activities, daily responsibilities, and truly retreat.

In this opening talk, what I would also love to share with you are the traditional refuges and trainings that the Buddha offered, which can really help you find a way to make these four days as retreat-like as possible. I found it amazing—after a year, we were saying as a team that it's already been a year that we've been holding spaces online like this. What's possible?

I remember once I was doing walking practice in my parents' home in the Netherlands. Another phenomenal thing is that I'm not even on a landline internet here—I still feel the connection, but I bought cell phone plans. Right now this is being streamed through a cell phone plan all the way to a tower in the Netherlands, coming all the way to you. But then I didn't have enough data, so I did that retreat in my parents' home.

And I was doing walking practice in my old bedroom. The whole room has changed. My mom painted the walls red. I couldn't see any signs of a teenager living there anymore. And it was already quite interesting to just watch my mind, going to this place where I've spent so many countless years.

When I was almost finished with my practice of walking, my hand was on the doorknob. The doorknob and the light switch were the only things that hadn't changed. And in just a moment, I saw the mind remembering all these fears I used to have when I was a child. Then this voice came and said, "Not present anymore." It was this really deep sense of release, of seeing the impermanent nature of some of these fears that were the biggest thing in my life when I was a teenager.

So on this retreat, what we really want to invite you into is to make it work for you—in the midst of your home that you might be sharing with other people, maybe also acknowledging that you still have to attend to some work. All that is possible. And it's possible to hold that with the support of mindfulness.

Just pause for a moment. Maybe take a moment to look at your space, the space that you're in. Your temple. Just like you would if you were in a meditation hall at IMS. I would love for you to make everything that you do on this retreat as sacred and mindful as possible.

I love this from Barbara Brown Taylor. She says, "Hanging laundry on the line offers you a chance to fly prayer flags disguised as bath towels and underwear." Home retreating allows us to see the sacred in the mundane.

What I'd like to do now is give you an overview of what you can expect in this session. In just a few moments, I want to invite you into a meditation that really supports the establishment of mindfulness, just to get started. We'll explore what kind of experi-

ences you can easily connect with again and again. We'll also explore some suggestions for movement meditation. After that, I want to offer a teaching on how to take refuge as a reflection.

We've had a lot that's been coming toward us. We're still in the midst of the pandemic. There's a lot of social and racial injustice. There's so many things that we're holding right now. So I want to invite the Buddhist teachings on the three refuges, and in the talk also explore how we can protect ourselves and bear witness as we're holding what sometimes might feel unbearable.

Another thing that I would love to invite you into is to pause. I love how Roxanne already started saying welcome, really welcoming every body and everything that you bring to this retreat. So this first session, you could sum it up in two words: pause and welcome. All in the support of finding ways, even in your home, to be as continuously mindful as possible.

I love this teaching from Ajahn Chah pointing exactly to that. Ajahn Chah was a Thai forest master monk. He said, "In practicing, don't think that you have to sit in order for it to be meditation, or that you have to walk back and forth in order for it to be meditation. Don't think like that. Meditation is simply a matter of practice. Whether you're giving a sermon, sitting here listening, or going away from here, keep the practice in your heart and be alert to what's proper and what's not."

And then, referring to his teacher Ajahn Mun, he said, "Ajahn Mun once said that we have to make our practice the shape of a circle. A circle never comes to an end. Keep it going continually. Keep the practice going continually without stop."

I listened to him and thought, "When I finish listening to this talk, what should I do?" And then the answer came: make my mindfulness timeless. Make sure that the mind knows and sees what's proper and what's not at all times.

This is our invitation, this encouragement to explore how to make this practice like a circle. I really also love how the Buddha puts it. He would say that mindfulness is established in one just to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And in that way, we can dwell independently, not clinging to anything in the world.

So pause for a moment. Just notice the body. Can you welcome the bodily sensations of touch, of temperature?

For this first day on retreat, and for any other day, I really want to invite you to keep pausing. And it doesn't really mean stopping. It means way more remembering—remembering to be mindful.

At IMS, there's a staff dining hall. And the door going back to the hall where everybody is in silence, meditating most of the time—that door on the inside of the staff dining hall, on top of the doorknob, it says "the pause that remembers." Just going back into the space where a lot of mindfulness is being cultivated, and maybe you've been talking, and then—oh, pausing. It's really kind of my favorite meditation instruction. And really use the pause throughout the retreat.

Also, maybe all of a sudden in your practice over the course of these days, you might have a question. Pause. And know that you can actually send us a question via email. And maybe even doing the typing or the touching of the screen, however, whatever device you use—can you make that also into your practice? So that you get really clear: what is it that wants to be asked? Then pause, maybe even pausing before you click send. Because when we pause, we can not only know our experience unfolding in the moment—when we pause, we can also connect with the experience of being mindful, which to me feels like a great protection and a refuge.

And so in this session, the guided meditation will be a little shorter, about fifteen minutes. And when it comes to our guided meditations, please know that they are simple suggestions on the basis of "come and see for yourself."

In the packet that you might have already seen, we've also suggested a structure or a schedule that you could follow. If that works for you, take advantage. And if not, then that's okay. Really again, emphasizing to see what works for you in your home, wherever you are on your retreat.

So stepping into a moment of pausing again. Maybe the body has been in one position for half an hour. Just check if it wants to move a little bit, if it wants to hydrate. And see if you can find a comfortable position and yet an alert one. Perhaps lengthening your spine.

And starting with directing mindfulness externally, by simply noticing, looking around again into your dharma hall and the space that you're in. You might have been sheltering in place for a long time. The space might feel familiar. Can you find something new in the space? Something you haven't seen before. Mindfulness oriented externally.

And then taking a moment and see if you would like to have your eyes kind of softly cast down, or open, or closed. And taking a moment to see if there's any tension in the body. Would it be helpful to soften your belly as an act of compassion? Loosen the jaw. Soften the mask of the face. Just see if you can really kind of let your shoulders hang down, let the arms be heavy. And lengthening the spine. Tuck the chin in a little.

And pause. Just check if you're in a comfortable position. If sitting doesn't feel good to you, know that you have options. You can also stand or lie down. Really go back to the basics of exploring what experience is easy and natural to be aware of. To ground awareness.

And inviting you to become aware of hearing—the sounds that are appearing and disappearing in the space you're in, your temple, your meditation hall.

Or the sounds that are coming in from my end, this voice. Sometimes you might hear a cracking sound of the sun touching the plastic of the trailer, expanding.

Tuning into the experience of hearing. Let there be in the hearing simply the hearing. How much effort does it take to be mindful of hearing? Welcoming the sounds as best as you can.

What's your experience of being mindful of sounds? Is it something that might feel natural, that you can connect with? Is there resistance to it? Also notice when the mind might wander off, when another experience is calling for attention. And checking for now if it's helpful, when that experience passes, to come back to sounds. Is that a helpful place to ground awareness back into?

Just like sounds appearing and disappearing, so do body parts, body sensations come and go. I invite you now to attune to how the body is speaking to you, as though you were listening to it with that same receptivity as listening to sound. Sensations of tingling, touch, temperature. Listening to the body, to how it speaks. There is a body.

Is it difficult or easy to be aware of bodily sensations? Can it be an anchor to return to again and again? This body always being in real time.

Sometimes it can be helpful to let awareness be more specific and attune to how the body is breathing, to support the momentum of awareness. Where in the body do you feel the breath moving the most? Maybe it's the chest or the belly. Breathing, and know you're breathing. What's that experience like? Is there resistance to feeling the breath, or receptivity?

In the midst of sounds, in the midst of thoughts, there's this wave of the breath coming in and going out. You're never too late for the present moment. You can always start over again when the mind is lost in some planning or thinking. And then checking for yourself: is there an experience, especially in the beginning, you can connect with to support this kind awareness, this knowing? Your home base.

As we're coming to a close of the guided meditation, also take a moment to notice the state of mind and the heart. Can we say welcome to it, as best as we can?

In a few moments, you'll hear me ring the bell three times. Just noticing sounds again, appearing and disappearing.

So again, I'd like to welcome you to our retreat. And maybe because of causes and conditions, you tuned in a little later. My name is Bart Van Melik, and I have the great privilege to get us started with our opening talk.

I want to begin by encouraging you, especially this morning—if it's still your morning; I'm calling in from the Netherlands, where it's already the afternoon—to pause and really connect with an experience you can easily feel, that you can come home to. We sometimes call this your anchor of practice. It can shift throughout the day. Sometimes for me, it's just sounds in and out, which creates more space in the mind. Sometimes that gets too spacious, and then it's helpful to really feel the preciseness of the belly rise and fall to establish mindfulness.

But we don't want to be too rigid, just staying there, especially as we're meditating in the complexity of our daily lives. It's also about being open to whatever is calling for your attention, externally as well.

Another practice that we invite you into, if it's possible, is to do some formal walking meditation. And there too, it can be helpful to find an experience in that movement that you can easily connect with and come home to.

So I'm going to invite you now, wherever you are, to see if you can place your hands on your lap or your table, or if you're lying down, next to you. First pause and really feel the hands touching—just like you would if you were standing and feeling the feet. See if you can become very curious, and if your body is able to do so, lift your right hand up with a lot of curiosity. Maybe playfulness. Feel how the hand and the arm are going up, as high as you like. Know that you're feeling the movement. And also notice when you're going to go back, going down. Notice and feel that moment when the placing is happening, the hand back on your lap or wherever. Pause.

And shifting to the left, let your left hand slowly come up. And when you know you're feeling this, that's mindfulness. That's what we're cultivating. Bringing the hand back down at your own pace. And pausing again. Allowing the hands to be there. Maybe one more at your own pace. Lifting. Placing. Lifting. Placing.

In the same way we've just played, you can maybe find outside or in your space indoors a little route of about twelve to fifteen steps. When you stand looking at your trail, just take your environment in first. You could even do that right now where you are. There's still awareness. It's just knowing something that's happening externally, probably coming in through the eyes. And if you were to do walking meditation on your retreat later on, bring that same attention to your feet and your legs—lifting, moving, and placing as your anchor. At your own pace, at your own speed. And that might change too. Sometimes we want to be really slow, and sometimes to pick the energy up, it's helpful to go a little faster.

When you've reached the end of your fifteen- or twelve-pace trail, stop. Pause for a moment. Notice the turning. Slowly go back. And the anchor could be the lifting and placing of your feet, or the movement of the legs, or the whole body. Play with that. What's easy for you to stay connected with?

And then when something else is calling for your attention—and it will—just maybe stop. You have options. You always have options in meditation. Let that come in and be known. And when it fades, maybe go back to walking or just continue your movement, but then letting go of the anchor and becoming present to whatever is calling for your attention. It could even be someone in your household saying, "It's your time to cook dinner." It could be anything. This is a retreat in the midst of daily living.

Please know that you can meditate in any posture. My favorite one in terms of real movement is outside swimming. Even in the winter—I already did my swim because I'm six hours ahead of the East Coast time. And just going into that cold water, really feeling how the body is speaking. So that's my anchor, just feeling the movement.

And in New York, where I'm having this great privilege to teach meditation to many different people—young people who are in homeless shelters and incarcerated, but also a group of dedicated veterans in a VA hospital—there was one man who once asked me, "Is it okay while you do walking or sitting practice that I pretend as if I'm dancing salsa with my wife?" And we all looked at him and I said, "Sure."

He said, that really kind of brings me into the present moment. And it was just lovely to see how everyone has their own way of creating a meditation that's like a circle we can always tap into again and again.

I'd like to share with you a Zen koan that a dear friend of mine introduced me to about a year ago, and it's been so helpful. It goes like this: The student asks, "When times of great difficulty visit us, how should we meet them?" The teacher says, "Welcome."

Just the simplicity, but the profound power of that koan has been really shifting my practice quite a bit. This welcome—at first I thought, does that mean I just have to accept everything? No. Because I looked into the history of that koan, and it was shared in a time of great social unrest and injustice. That's not what the teacher was coming from. It's this welcoming of the reality or the truth of our experience in the moment. I think that's been very helpful for me. I think it can be helpful also to hold the things that might feel almost unbearable to hold.

Like in this very moment, the trial of George Floyd is happening. Yesterday, there was a car driving into an officer at the Capitol. Both in my home country and in America, this surge of hatred against Asian Dutch, Asian Americans, police brutality. It's a lot. And then we're still in the midst of this pandemic.

This very powerful koan sometimes gives me a sense of space, saying welcome to feeling exhausted from the pandemic. Welcome to worrying thoughts. How are we going to make it? What it also does, this powerful koan, is it allows you to see when we're bouncing off the truth of suffering, which is there. The Buddha called it the first noble truth. When we're not welcoming, when there might be personal challenges—for me, that might sometimes mean hiding from needing help, not going to a doctor, not asking for help. Or we might hide from relational challenges. We might be in a position to really let someone know about what they're doing and give them feedback, but not do it.

And one of the things that I've noticed within myself is how I can hide from social challenges, cultural challenges. Also because of the social location that I find myself in, in this society—both in the Netherlands and in America—of being this white cisgender male, able-bodied, a father and married, and who has the privilege to stay in place and shelter in place during a pandemic. Then it can be easier to be silent, to not speak out, but to hide from the discomfort of addressing patriarchy or addressing racism, white supremacy.

So there's something really powerful about this welcome, because it can also allow us to see when we're not wanting to welcome. But then can we maybe—that resistance—can we welcome that? Pause and welcome.

And I found out for myself that my intention to say welcome really supports taking refuge in what traditionally is called the triple gem: taking refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. If we were to be together in that big hall at IMS, with that beautiful Buddha, the plants, the light coming in from the windows—on the first opening night, what we would usually offer, and I've been practicing on many retreats, is this tradition of reflecting on refuges that can protect us and support us and bearing witness to our experience, to say welcome. And then on those evenings, we follow that by kind of as a community taking also these vows, these five mindfulness trainings or precepts. But I also want to just touch a little bit upon these and see how they might guide you on your retreat in the midst of your home.

I want to unpack these three refuges with you.

The first one, refuge in Buddha. To me, my interpretation is to take refuge in kindness and awareness. And every time when I pause and remember to be mindful, that's in a way a manifestation of taking refuge in Buddha. Because it means that you're taking refuge in the potential to wake up, in the potential to meet experience with this welcome, with kindness. The simplicity of pause and welcome is in a way taking refuge in Buddha.

Another way of looking at this refuge is reflecting on this historical being who made such an enormous impact in the world. And it's still reverberating 2,600 years later. It's the reason that we are here right now. This being woke up to understanding suffering and the cessation of it. And this person was human, just like us, having this potential to fully wake up.

And so another way that I take refuge myself is to sometimes ask in practice: in this moment, is there any craving, wanting things to be different?

And sometimes the answer is no. It's fine the way it is. Then I would ask, is there any aversion or ill will present? In that moment, no. No resistance. Then I would ask, is there any confusion in this moment? Or is there clarity?

Sometimes we actually really touch into what you could call Buddha nature, and we're noticing that craving, ill will, and confusion are absent. And we can rest there.

Maybe just pause right now. Does it feel like a refuge, a protection?

Perhaps give yourself the opportunity to check—is your body still comfortable? Your posture will inform you if it wants to shift. Refuge in kindness to the body.

The second refuge is the refuge in Dharma, or Dhamma. These are Sanskrit and Pali words—the Buddhist teachings are recorded in both languages. Just as taking refuge in Buddha means for me taking refuge in kindness and awareness, taking refuge in Dharma means taking refuge in nature and wisdom.

The word Dharma has multiple meanings. One is the Buddhist teachings themselves. What the Buddha discovered are very natural laws operating in nature, and out of compassion, he began to teach his understanding of these laws.

One law that he saw was that in order to understand suffering and be free from it, we must understand clinging. He also saw that nothing whatsoever should be clung to as I, me, or mine. He really saw that when this happens—that natural inclination of taking things personally—stress comes about.

Another law he discovered was one of the most, perhaps for me in the beginning, obvious laws: the law of impermanence. But having heard of it is one thing. Having really understood this law of change is a whole other matter, and to live in harmony with it.

On his deathbed, the Buddha asked the monastics caring for him, "Is everything I taught clear to you?" They responded, "Yes, venerable sir." And then supposedly his last words were, "All conditioned things, all phenomena, are impermanent. Keep practicing diligently."

I've found it so powerful to notice that the Buddha teaches about this law so frequently that it's become a refuge for me to really tune into the changing nature of experience. I might settle into listening to sounds, knowing there's hearing. Then shifting awareness just slightly and noticing how the sounds are changing. We come to trust that experience of change moment to moment.

Because it's a hard law. Things change in ways we don't want them to. But it can also be very freeing when we notice we are totally in harmony with it—taking refuge in Dharma.

Finding refuge in Dharma could also mean going out into nature, pausing, and simply connecting with a tree. In the Netherlands, spring has sprung. Yesterday when I was swimming outside in the lake, I saw the very first swallow. Perhaps you're in an apartment and nature is unfolding in a plant you have in the house that you can also really pause with. Just open up to that plant.

And also know that we ourselves are not outside of nature. Coming home more internally again and perhaps just noticing that I am nature—this too can be a refuge.

You will also be invited to keep coming to our sessions, whether live or later. Even knowing that the wisdom of the Buddha being offered is a way of taking refuge in Dharma. I see hearing the Dharma just like eating food—I just need to do it every day.

Let's also be creative. What can support me in finding refuge sometimes in wisdom and nature? It could be poetry. Music. Are there spiritual teachings to support you to say welcome to this experience?

Let's pause for a moment. Is there any way that this refuge in wisdom and nature is unfolding right now for you?

And then the last refuge, the refuge in community—or in Pali, Sangha—a community of people with that same intention to wake up.

The more we attune to nature and its unfolding laws, the more we start to see that everything is connected. Even if I stretch the body out this way, you can feel it all the way down in the left leg. It's like this web of life from which it's impossible to fall. And then there will definitely be moments where we feel this natural feeling of being lonely, but we're not alone. We're kind of caught in this inescapable relationality, this mutuality. Through the breath, even through the internet right now—all the people and actions it took for us to be here, who made this device—it's amazing.

In the talk I want to offer tomorrow about befriending difficulty, I looked at what kind of suggestions the Buddha gave. Whether it was for ill will or for worrying, always he would suggest finding refuge in friendship and in suitable conversations. And so taking refuge in Sangha could, for example, mean when you really feel like you need some support with something, can you ask for help? You can reach out via email. Maybe also, because you're at home, asking yourself: Where can I connect? With whom can I connect right now? There's a manifestation of taking refuge in Sangha.

Right now, you might only be seeing me on your device. What happens if you just realize for a moment that we're together with hundreds of people sharing this moment? Maybe just also realizing all the people and the support we were given to be on this path, to be here right now. Refuge in Sangha.

I want to close now with also bringing us into these five mindfulness trainings, or five precepts, that we on retreats at IMS traditionally take. They're universal—they're in every spiritual tradition. And they're offered as a way to create protection: to protect oneself from harm, to protect others from harm, and both ourselves and others from harm. They're really true practices of compassion and understanding. I like the way Thich Nhat Hanh has framed them. I'll just offer them and then see what arises for you and how they might inspire these coming four days.

The first training is to protect life and to decrease violence in oneself, in the family, and in society. Just pause for a moment to notice how that lands—to protect life. Reconnecting with this vow, maybe you take it every day, this training. What could it mean for you, knowing the specifics of these four days?

We want to encourage you to see what's feasible in terms of attending the sessions or also creating time for formal practice. Doing the best you can and letting that be good enough. Being mindful of the people whom you might be sharing the space with and their needs. Another way of framing this is: knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to protect and respect life.

The second mindfulness training, or precept, is to practice social justice, generosity, not stealing, not exploiting other living beings. Pause, welcoming whatever comes to mind hearing these words. Be generous also if other people might need your attention these next four days. Generous with your attention that might then be more outwardly oriented. If you have to take your kids to school, making it a mindful trip to school. It's totally fine if you need to address some work things or have to fully work in the midst of this retreat. Can you be generous with your attention? Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to cultivate generosity in every possible way.

And the third mindfulness training, or precept, is to practice responsible sexual behavior in order to protect individuals, couples, families, and children. Pausing again to connect with that. At IMS, it would mean taking the vow to abstain from any sexual behavior, any activity.

That's something you might want to explore these next four days. Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to abstain from sexual misconduct.

The fourth training is to practice deep listening and loving speech to restore communication and reconcile. You might be in a position to make this almost a fully silent retreat, and that's fine. Others might find themselves in a more relational retreat as well. Speech is such a powerful practice—to be mindful, to pause. If you're engaging in conversation, perhaps just check: Is what I'm saying true? Is it kind? Is it appropriate? Is what I'm saying beneficial? And is it timely? Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to cultivate wise speech.

The last training is about mindful consumption—to help us not bring any toxins into the body or into the mind and heart. Just pausing to consider what that might look like for you. Perhaps retreating from technology a bit, if possible. Consumption of news, of

alcohol. Maybe not taking the cell phone into your bedroom with you. Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to commit to a clear mind that sees the truth of experience.

These are the five trainings.

Just pausing for a moment as we come to a close of our first session. See if you can connect with an aspiration or an intention that you might have for this special time. What wants to be cultivated or let go of? Maybe an intention is clear, or maybe nothing is arising—that's fine too, and it may come later. It can sometimes be really helpful to make that intention into a refuge when things become difficult, reconnecting again with that heartfelt aspiration.

In the next couple of hours, I encourage you to explore, pause, and connect with experience. Find something you can anchor with—walking, doing dishes, cleaning the house, whatever it is—and see if you can keep saying welcome, just receiving the truth of experience as best as you can.

I'd like to end with a very powerful poem by Václav Havel. He was a Czech statesman, the first president of the Czech Republic. The poem is called "It Is I Who Must Begin."

*It is I who must begin. And once I begin, once I try—here and now, not excusing myself by saying things would be easier elsewhere, without grand speeches and gestures, but all the more persistently—to live in harmony with the voice of being as I understand it within myself. As soon as I do that, living in harmony with the voice of being, then I suddenly discover to my big surprise that I am neither the only one, nor the first, nor the most important one to have set out on this road. And whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether I am lost or not. Whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether or not I am lost.*

Words of wisdom from Václav Havel.

I want to close now one more time by saying welcome—welcoming you, welcoming all that you bring, welcoming the forces at play in our lives.

CHAPTER 60

# Questions & Responses

Joseph Goldstein · 1h33

> *In this Q&A session, Joseph Goldstein responds to a wide range of practitioner questions with characteristic depth and clarity. He begins with a guided meditation emphasizing the phrase "there is a body" as a framework for open awareness, then addresses the cosmological distinction between Māra as a celestial being versus Māra as a metaphor for defilement.*
>
> *The talk explores several key themes: how to cultivate equanimity in the face of global suffering without falling into indifference or overwhelm; the distinction between craving (taṇhā) and wholesome aspiration (chanda); and practical guidance for walking meditation, emphasizing feeling rather than watching movement. Goldstein offers particularly detailed responses on supporting the dying process, working with attention difficulties through one-step-at-a-time practice, and transforming challenging living environments through inner balance and compassion.*
>
> *A substantial portion addresses the teaching of anattā (non-self), using the analogy of a river to illustrate that 'self' is merely a designation for the flowing stream of mind-body phenomena rather than a separate entity. Goldstein carefully distinguishes between right view (sammā-diṭṭhi) as belief versus conceit (māna) and craving (taṇhā) as embodied experiences, explaining how wrong view is uprooted at stream-entry while conceit persists until full awakening. The framework of two levels of truth—conventional and ultimate—provides guidance for integrating these insights into daily life.*

Welcome back, everyone. We'll begin this session also with a short meditation, about 15 minutes or so.

Find a comfortable sitting posture, however you are practicing. Again, soften the eyes and the jaw and the shoulders, relaxing into the body. I've been using that phrase, "there is a body," just to remind oneself to settle into the awareness of the whole body posture. Just sit and know you're sitting.

Within that framework—there is a body—be aware of what arises predominantly in the field of awareness. It might be sounds coming and going. It might be the sensations of the body breathing. Settle back in a very receptive mode.

Some people find it helpful to make a soft mental note or label, starting with "there is a body," or it could be "hearing," or "in and out" or "rise and fall" when feeling the breath. You can experiment to see if the noting is of help to you or not. Occasionally remind yourself with the phrase, "there is a body."

Within that larger frame, become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. You may become aware of other bodily sensations—tightness or pressure or vibration, warmth or coolness, heaviness, lightness. Become mindful of any bodily sensation that calls your attention. Open to it, feeling it.

Again, rest in the larger frame: there is a body.

Stay alert for the appearance of thoughts or images in the mind. A hearing note might be particularly helpful—just "thinking," or "seeing" if it's an image. In noting the thought, being mindful of it, we stay disentangled from it. See it just as another arising object in the open space of awareness.

By keeping the larger frame of "there is a body," it's sometimes easier within that frame to allow the breath to follow its own natural rhythm without any interference, pushing or pulling. The body knows how to breathe. We can just be settled back in the awareness of the whole body and simply be aware of the sensations of the body breathing all by itself.

Be mindful of any of the five hindrances that Bart talked about this morning. If any of them should arise and become predominant, be mindful, and the noting here would be very helpful. Just "wanting" or "desire" or "aversion," "anger," "sleepiness" or "dullness," "restlessness" or "doubt." Keep an eye out for the arising of those mind states. Note them, be with them, see how they too come and go.

When you're ready, you can gently open your eyes and become aware of the phenomenon of seeing. Maybe even make a mental note just to reinforce that awareness, that mindfulness, which we can then carry out into the busyness of our days, periodically remembering to be mindful of seeing.

---

Thank you for sending in the many questions that you did. We probably won't be able to get to all of them because there were quite a few, but we'll go through as many as we can.

Before that, I have to make a little correction to something I said yesterday. I was talking about how the Buddha or practitioners would sometimes see different mind states arise and say, "Mara, I see you." I need to clarify that a little bit, and in order to do that, we have to take a little foray into Buddhist cosmology. Some of you may relate to this, others not, but it provides a context for the clarification.

Mara is used in two different ways. One way we use it—especially in contemporary Buddhist practice—is Mara as the embodiment of ignorance and delusion. When we see a defilement in the mind, we might say, "Oh, Mara, I see you." I do that a lot when I notice conceit arising in the mind. "Mara, I see you." And I'm always delighted, actually, because I'd much rather see it than not see it. There's actually a kind of joy or delight in that moment of mindfulness.

But the other meaning of Mara—and that's where it gets a little cosmological—is that Mara classically in the Buddhist texts is actually a being from the highest of the sensual heavens, and his main purpose in being is to keep people ensnared in the realm of sense pleasures. It's quite different from the Western notion of the devil. Here's this being who just wants to keep us enjoying ourselves in the realm of sense pleasures. He's always trying to dissuade practitioners from staying on the path, but he's really seen as one of these celestial beings that comes down and bothers people. And so then the Buddha or a practitioner would say, "O Mara, I see you."

The reason I wanted to make this clarification is that I believe yesterday I said when the Buddha or practitioners see defilements arise in their minds, they'll say, "Mara, I see you." But of course, for the Buddha and fully enlightened beings, the defilements have all been uprooted. Defilements do not arise in their minds. So when the Buddha or one of the great Arahants would use that phrase, it was referring to this being.

not to their own state of mind. So I just wanted to clarify that so we don't have the impression that the defilements are still arising in the mind of a fully awakened being. So now I feel like I've cleared up that little karmic knot.

So here we'll go to the questions that you sent in.

*Would it be beneficial to review one's practice at the end of a sitting and also look back at how one has traveled throughout the day at the end of the day? If so, what would be the value and how can this be done?*

I think it's a good idea—that kind of self-reflection, not in a heavy way and certainly not in a judgmental way. But just after a sitting, maybe reflecting: well, what just happened? Was my mind pretty concentrated and mindful, or was it getting lost a lot? And if it was getting lost a lot, maybe reflect on what it was getting lost in. This just brings all of this to greater consciousness.

And at the end of the day, it might be good to reflect on how your day was spent. Were you frittering away time, as I was doing on my retreat occasionally? Or were you pretty focused in your day? You reflect a little: was anything unskillful done? When you look back—oh, maybe I responded with anger to someone, or there was a particularly noticeable manifestation of greed. Again, all without judgment. It's all just to bring these tendencies into the light.

And also reflect on the wholesome things, which is a very helpful thing to do because it really raises the good energy in our system. So if you were particularly generous or loving in some way, or of service—whatever it might be—it's just this reflection on the day, kind of assessing: oh, this one, maybe I could practice letting it go. Or: oh, this was good, maybe I should cultivate it a little more. I think it can be a useful thing to do.

*My father is terminally ill with cancer and has a few months to live. How can I support him in this last period of life? He's not a Buddhist practitioner, but he's open and interested. How can I support myself in this very difficult period? Are there any specific teachings that are essential? How do you talk to a person who is dying?*

This is a really meaningful question because at different times in our own lives, we may be with people who are dying, and it's also a reminder of our own mortality. We're all in the queue. So it's good, in a way, to get comfortable with that process, whether it's being with someone else or in our own process of dying when that happens.

That last question struck me particularly: how do you talk to a person who is dying? I would reframe it a bit—less about how do I talk to the person, and more emphasis on listening. As we're with somebody who's either very sick or dying, rather than jumping in and trying to be overly helpful, can we just enter into that space very softly and receptively, listening to where the person is at? Because people in that process will be in very different places; they'll be open or closed in very different ways. So before jumping in with our own agenda, I think it's really helpful just to be there—to be there in a loving way, listening, and really inviting the communication to come from your father, or whoever it may be. Then you get a feel for what's appropriate and what's not. Practicing listening skillfully would be a very skillful thing to do.

Generally, if and when it's appropriate in that space, the teachings suggest in some way or other reminding people of the good things they've done in their lives. Because as things come to mind in the dying process, there may be a whole life review. And as we know from our own minds, there can often be a tendency to focus on the negative. So in that very tender space—and again, it's not about making this a big project or trying to force anything—but in that listening space, if the opportunity presents itself, keep this in mind. Just having this person recall the beautiful things they've done in their life can be really helpful.

There are people who have devoted their lives and careers to working with death and dying. One of the Insight Meditation teachers, Rodney Smith, used to be the director of the Seattle Hospice for many years—thirteen or fifteen years—and he wrote a very beautiful book called *Lessons from the Dying*. I would suggest it. It's really a lovely book. He recounts many of his experiences of being with people who are dying, the mistakes that are made, and what's helpful and skillful. That might be a good resource for you.

*Since desire creates suffering, could you please talk about how to deal with ambition in the practice—ambitions of developing metta, of setting oneself free, of being enlightened?*

So the desire for enlightenment—how do we reconcile this if craving or desire is the cause of suffering? Where does desire for wholesome things come in?

The problem here is not a real problem because it's more linguistic. In English, the word *desire* has many meanings.

We use the word desire in English in many different ways. One way involves clinging and greed and grasping—that's the desire and craving I was talking about yesterday, where there's that thirst for something in an unwholesome way, where there's a lot of clinging and grasping.

But another meaning of desire reflects a different mental quality entirely. In the Buddhist understanding, it has its own specific name in Pali: *chanda*, which is simply called "desire to do." That's the quality of motivation, the energy to do something, which in and of itself is ethically neutral. This energy to act could be associated with the wholesome or with the unwholesome, but it's that compelling energy to act.

So we could say, "Yes, there's a desire for enlightenment" or "a desire to become more compassionate." This is not the desire of craving or clinging—it's more the desire of aspiration. Simply changing the words we use in English will help settle the mind into the realization that these are two really different states. Even though we may use

the same word, desire, one is the desire of clinging and grasping, and one is this desire that's simply an aspiration which sets the direction for us—going in the direction of awakening, or the direction of more compassion, or more loving-kindness.

Hopefully you can sense, even from the use of that word aspiration, the feeling of being settled back in the heart. It just leads us onward. The desire of craving, by contrast, is like we're leaning forward, holding on and grasping. So it's simply understanding the difference: even though at times we use the same word, it's being used in very different ways and reflecting different mind states.

---

The next question was interesting, about equanimity and how we understand it in a situation like we're in now with the pandemic.

Someone wrote: "I've recently answered questions from friends about equanimity in the face of what is going on in the world by saying things like 'equanimity can bring you closer to suffering and help with discernment.' But after hearing news stories about thousands who have had to flee their homes, becoming refugees, and all the massive suffering involved worldwide with this pandemic, somehow there was doubt: How can one be equanimous with that level of suffering?"

Here it's important to really dive into the understanding of this mind state of equanimity and why it's so powerful even in situations of tremendous suffering in the world. Equanimity serves as a counterbalance to two opposing tendencies that could easily arise as we engage with the reality of suffering around us.

The first unskillful tendency is indifference. Because of technology, we're so aware of global suffering, and it can feel like too much. We think, "I can't deal with it all," and perhaps, "There's not much I can do about it." So we pull back, and in a way we settle into some flavor of indifference. That's not a skillful response.

On the other side, as we take in the news and the reality of all this suffering, some people find themselves overwhelmed by sorrow. The mind gets overwhelmed because it's so vast and it's not clear what to do. We're drowning in the sorrow that arises. That's not helpful either.

Equanimity is that space which is neither indifferent nor drowning in sorrow. We could call it spaciousness of mind—mind like space, which can hold everything. It doesn't pull back out of aversion, and it doesn't drown in what's happening. From that space of equanimity, where the mind is not reactive—not leading to indifference or overwhelm—we're in a place of balance.

Then something becomes possible, and this phrase can serve as a guide for us as we navigate these situations: Can we be responsive rather than reactive? Instead of that initial reaction to the magnitude of suffering, and then getting caught up in our own reactivity one way or another, with equanimity we take it in. We're open to it, we feel it. And from that place of balance, we can respond in whatever way is possible, whatever way is appropriate in the moment.

Sometimes there's not much we can do, and we simply want to develop a heart that's open to the suffering, feeling compassion for it. Sometimes there are things we can do—through acts of generosity, through acts of kindness. Equanimity gives us that inner balance and inner space to actually hold it all. We're not pulling away from it and we're not drowning in it. We're holding it in this open space of mind, allowing for compassionate responsiveness to emerge. And we simply see how that can manifest.

I think this is a really important area to explore for yourselves, because equanimity doesn't stir people the way qualities like love and compassion and peace do. We don't hear much about equanimity.

It's not in the news much. And yet, it is this powerful balancing force in the mind. That's why the Buddha included it in the four Brahma Viharas, the four boundless states, which I will be talking more about tomorrow. So I would really encourage you to explore in yourselves what this quality of equanimity is like—this quality of balance, its openness, its non-reactivity, this connectedness. And the possibility for responsiveness that comes from it.

There was a question about walking practice. Someone wrote: "Most of the time I feel kind of anxious doing the walking practice. I feel an unpleasant squeeze on my chest and the breath is not full. Usually I do walking with noticing and naming the different phases of each step. Today, inspired by Bart's student who imagined salsa dancing, I just let go of the naming and the differentiation of each step and let the body walk in a smooth way, almost like a dance. I noticed the squeeze less strong, and I noticed a pleasant feeling." But then the question goes on: "I'm wondering, is this just aversion to what I was feeling, or is this a skillful thing to do?"

First, I want to put in a plug for the walking meditation, because often people think of the walking as kind of second-tier meditation—the real meditation is sitting, and walking is what you do during recess, in the in-between times. This is not a wise way of looking at it. Over the years I've found that as much insight comes in the walking as in the sitting. It's a very important part of the practice. And it's the practice which in some ways carries over the most into our lives, because the more you do walking meditation, after a while being mindful of the body moving becomes the default. That becomes the

default setting of the mind, just out of habit. If we've done a lot of walking meditation, then in your life—walking down the street or in your apartment or house from room to room—automatically the mind will drop into being mindful. So it's a powerful way of integrating mindfulness into one's life, as well as really opening up profound understandings. All of this is just a plug to keep doing the walking meditation.

However, we want to do it skillfully. From the tone of the question, I had the sense that at first maybe there was a little too much over-efforting, trying to be too precise in the naming and the feeling of each different part of each step. This could be done in a very relaxed way, but it could also be done with a little too much efforting, which might have caused those unpleasant physical sensations. So first, to say it is fine to just imagine yourself salsa dancing for a while, as a way to counteract any tendency to over-effort or get a little tight.

Even watching one's posture—do you feel like you're kind of bent over and looking at the walking, the movement? This is actually quite common. But really, being mindful of the movement has nothing to do with seeing it. In fact, I would recommend particularly not looking at the foot or leg. Keep the gaze a little way ahead.

There's a reframe of our understanding of how we're doing the practice, and of what mindfulness means, particularly in walking and in movement. A lot of the meditative language we use around mindfulness involves words like watching or noticing. It's all suggestive of looking at something. At different times that might be helpful, but it's really not helpful in the walking at all.

I discovered something quite early on in my practice which made a huge difference. It made the walking go from being effortful to delightful. And that is simply changing the language I was framing it with. Instead of having the notion of watching—even if one is not actually looking at the foot or leg, there could still be that sense of kind of being up in the head somehow, and the attention is being directed from there, as if we were watching the movement. So change the language from watching to feeling. Feel the movement. Feel the touch. Because when we're feeling it, that's from the inside. That's not being up here in the head looking at anything. We're in the body, simply feeling it move.

Just as a little experiment right now, if you like, move your arm back and forth. Watching it—I'm going to exaggerate a bit—would be like this, like we're really intent on not losing it, on tracking it. Now just move your arm back and simply feel it. It could be like a dance. You can move in any way and you're simply feeling the movement. It becomes effortless.

I would suggest that you certainly continue with the walking practice because it's so valuable. But see if you can make this shift from watching to feeling. I think you'll find the whole system relaxes in that.

One person asked about having attention deficit disorder and finding it very hard to maintain focus during talks or meditation. They wondered how they could accept this with equanimity and still meditate, noting how difficult it is not to blame oneself and thereby strengthen wrong view and conceit.

A few things come to mind here. One is practicing a kind of open awareness rather than trying to have a directed awareness where you're attempting to stay on a single object. See what happens if you just settle back in an open awareness, trying to be mindful of whatever it is that's arising, even if the mind is jumping around a lot. Moment after moment, what are you aware of? It might be a sound, it might be a thought, it might be a sensation, it might be a breath. The mind does not have to stay, particularly in vipassana, on a single object. You can relax back and just be mindful of what is arising in your mind-body process, however it is. Moment after moment, you just acknowledge: there's this, there's this, there's this. It may be lots of thoughts, or the mind might seem to jump from sound to thought to sensation—that's fine if you're simply settled back and acknowledging in each moment what's present. So that's one thing I would try, and see if it actually helps you relax into the experience of what is going on.

From another angle, if you wanted to see if there's a way of actually strengthening the ability to stay concentrated in a more sustained way on a particular object, one approach you might try—and I've found this very helpful in general, but it may be specifically useful for what you're asking—relates to the walking meditation.

Sometimes people have the idea, suppose they have a pathway ten steps in length, that they're going to be mindful for these ten steps, this whole path of walking. That's way too much. Even to have the intention of being mindful for five steps is too much. How about, as we're doing the walking meditation, you just have the intention: can I feel—again, feeling rather than watching—can I feel one step? That's all. One step. And then you stop. One step. Did it. Okay, one more step. Okay, I could do that. Stop. Don't try to link them up. Just one step, one step, one step.

Doing it one step at a time may well be within your capacity, even with attention deficit disorder. You might see that you can stay attentive for the duration of one step. Well, that's all you need to do, because we're ever only taking one step at a time. But we get ahead of ourselves in our minds. We have these expectations of something—not only for you, but for most people—beyond their capacity. And so then we get frustrated or self-judgmental or whatever. One step.

You could do the same thing in sitting meditation. One breath. Not even one breath—one in-breath. That's all. Well, don't hold the in-breath too long; you're going to have to out-breath. One in-breath, one out-breath. But I think you get the picture. You might try that, and it might also help. So this combination of open awareness—just noticing whatever it is, even if they're quickly changing objects—or one step, one breath.

The next question opens up a whole big discussion. It was prefaced with words that I think are the most commonly used in questions that arise on meditation retreats: "If there is no self, then..." Because this is a big question for people. This idea of no self, unlike impermanence or even suffering or discontent—those we can easily relate to.

But no self, non-self—what does that mean? If it's not totally clear to you, that's fine. This is a counterintuitive teaching with profound implications for our freedom. You hear the teachings about it, reflect on it, let it sit, let it germinate. More questions arise, and all of that's fine because that's how slowly, gradually, we come to understand it.

So the question continues: if there is no self and my body doesn't belong to me, then am I just a collection of atoms in the form of a body belonging to no one? How do we reconcile living in a world that fixates so heavily on the sense of self—I, you, we, and they—with the knowledge that none of it is real? Basically, if there's no self, what does that mean for how we live in the world, which seems to revolve around being itself?

There's one framework in the teachings that is very helpful here, and it also relates to a deeper understanding of right and wrong view, which I'll get to in another question. The frame that can be really helpful, which is found in the teachings, is the frame of two levels of truth: relative truth and more ultimate truth. Or we could say conventional reality and more ultimate reality.

Just as an example of what that means in real life, imagine holding a glass or a cup. The cup is real. We're holding it. We use it. We drink from it. So it's definitely real—it's not a figment of our imagination. But on another level, if we looked at glass through a high-power microscope, glass would disappear. A cup would disappear. Then we would be on that level of just atoms and molecules. On that level, there is no cup. There is no glass. So the question in our lives is how do we integrate this understanding of the more ultimate level and also the relative level?

This is important to do. It reminded me of when I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's awakening. I was staying at the Burmese rest house where a lot of the Western practitioners were staying. In Bodh Gaya, one of the big landowners had a working elephant—really working. Sometimes when we'd be walking into the village, the elephant would be coming the other way. Well, I didn't stay in

the level of ultimate truth thinking, "Oh, that's just atoms and molecules. The elephant is mostly empty space." No, I moved out of the way. The elephant was a lot bigger than I was. So we need to engage on the relative level, the conventional level.

On that level, even using terms like I and you and we and they, using them as conventional designations, is totally fine. However, to the degree that through our practice we have experiences of the more ultimate level—where we really do see the body as being nothing solid—we may not be seeing it as atoms, but we can certainly feel it as just an energy flow of what we could say are minute particles, where there is no solidity at all and the form of the body has completely disappeared. We're getting a taste of what that more ultimate level of selflessness means. On that level, there is no self. There is no solid body. There is no solid being. Even though on the conventional level, the relative level, we use those concepts.

But this is the important point: the more grounded we are, the more experience we have of the ultimate level—that is, the momentariness of all phenomena, that really this mind-body process and the whole world is just a flow of momentary arisings and passings—but usually we're not seeing it on that level of perception. We're seeing it on the level of "this is a glass, this is a cup." But the more experience we have, mostly through our meditation, of this more ultimate level, then we operate on the relative level with much less attachment and clinging. Because we know deeply, and we know from our own experience, that everything we're relating to on a conventional level looks very different on this more ultimate level. It's not as solid as we think.

So the implication of our insight into impermanence and into emptiness of self that happens on the deeper level then gets translated into the way we're relating in this conventional world—but we're relating from a much freer place. We don't get seduced quite so much by attachment and craving and clinging and conceit. This is how they work together. They're not in conflict.

They're just two different levels of perception.

Just one last point on this. Whether we're thinking of it in terms of our own mind-body or just the example of the glass and the cup, it's important to understand that this relative and more ultimate level of truth is a union. It's not that the relative level is here and the ultimate level is somewhere else. It's just the cup. It's just this mind-body. It depends what level of perception, what refinement of perception we bring to it. From one level, it looks like a cup. On another level, no cup—it's just atoms and electrons. We want to understand that in a way, there's one reality, not two different realities, but they're seen from different levels. And that's what makes freedom in the relative world

possible, because we understand that this very same experience we're having on one level can be seen from a whole other perspective—a perspective that frees us as we navigate the relative world.

So this is a question that probably we all face at different times: "I live in a community and neighborhood where there's a lot of fighting, greed, and delusion. This stimulates much aversion, fear, and grief within me. I want to push it away, get away from it. Unfortunately, I don't have the finances to move or to live in a different place. I have to learn to relate to what is around me in a skillful way. What can you suggest?"

Even though the situation described may be a little bit on the extreme edge of challenging circumstances, I think all of us find ourselves at different times in our lives in environments that are not conducive to well-being. So the first thing that's really important is to practice being mindful of your own reactions in the mind—basically, the hindrances. You say it stimulates much aversion and fear and grief within you. Those mind states are your responsibility, because how you're relating to them is not dependent on what anybody else is doing or not doing. The external conditions may be the cause for these states to arise, but they have no power at all to determine how you relate to the grief or the anger or the aversion. That's completely one hundred percent your responsibility.

Understanding this is very empowering. We don't feel victimized by circumstances. We're not thinking, "They're making me feel a certain way." It's true they may be the cause for these feelings to arise, but are we identified with these states or not? Are we condemning these states or not? This is really important because we often don't see how the way we relate to unwholesome mind states can actually be feeding them.

How do we feed these unwholesome mind states? We feed them in two ways. First, we feed them by being totally lost and identified with them. "I'm so angry" or "I'm so afraid" or "I'm so grieving"—whatever it is. That identification really empowers those states within us and makes them stronger. But another way we feed these unwholesome mind states is through aversion towards them. "I hate this. I want this to go away." That aversion towards them actually strengthens them. This is not always immediately obvious, so I would suggest you really look at it.

Then, in understanding all of this, come back to your practice where you're including the grief, the fear, the aversion. They are mind states arising in the mind, and they become objects of your meditation. You want to be mindful of them so you're not getting lost and carried away by them, and you're not condemning them. It's equanimity—developing that quality of space. "Oh, this is aversion. Aversion feels like this. Fear feels like this."

Grief feels like this. Bringing that quality of mindfulness and investigation to these very mind states is really important because it will unhook you from an unnecessary level of suffering. You can't necessarily control what's happening in the environment, but you can influence how you are relating to what's arising in your own mind—relating either in a way that just creates more suffering for yourself, or in a way that actually brings about some insight into the mind, into these states themselves. And in not being caught by them, you will notice that they pass through much more quickly.

This is not a magic thing where they're never going to arise again. But you have learned to deal with them much more skillfully. So you don't get stuck in them. They become like passing clouds—difficult, stormy clouds passing through. Not so much of a problem.

This is the foundation for beginning your work in such a situation. Then, once you feel that you've come to some place of non-reactivity, or someplace of greater peace, it becomes a very interesting question: Is there a way of relating to the people in the environment who are doing these really unskillful or harmful things? As a way of perhaps short-circuiting that move to aversion and grief and fear that had been conditioning your mind, once you have established some place of inner balance or some little bit of equanimity, it might be interesting—as you're seeing people behave in unskillful ways—instead of focusing on the personality or even the behavior, which calls up all these emotions, to really focus on the suffering that is there causing those harmful actions.

People who are happy generally don't go around hurting other people. That kind of unskillful behavior usually comes out of a place of suffering. And if we can tune into that, sometimes it's very visible. If we stop and really look at a person as they're doing something not skillful, very often we can see the suffering underneath it. Or we can just be aware of it in a more general way.

By focusing on the suffering, it's possible to actually have their behavior be the cause of compassion arising in you, rather than fear or aversion or grief. Because you see the suffering in them and the suffering they may be causing. You see the suffering of the whole situation. And coming close to suffering, being open to suffering, is the cause for compassion to arise—when we can take it in with equanimity, when we don't fight against it, when we're not having aversion to it. It's like, "Oh yes, there's a lot of suffering here."

This is so interesting because it's a very complex situation, but it's so rich. This is a great practice opportunity. It would really be interesting, to the degree that you can work with this and develop it to some extent, to notice—if you have any relationship with any of these people in your environment—whether people start responding to you

differently when you are coming from a place of compassion rather than judgment or anger or aversion or fear. People respond to our energy. Is what we're putting out just adding to the problem, or are we stepping outside of the problem and coming to it from a very different mindset?

I'll just tell you one little anecdote. This has to do with our teacher Dipa Ma, who many of you may have heard of. She was this amazing woman in Calcutta—profound practice in both all the concentration practices and all the powers of mind that can be developed, as well as stages of enlightenment. At one point, somebody asked her what was in her mind, and she said, "Peace, concentration, and love." That's quite a mind.

She lived in a very poor section of Calcutta—we would probably call it a tenement. Very, very poor. There was an apartment building around a courtyard, and the apartments were all open to this courtyard. In India, the doors are always open. Dipa Ma told us that when she first moved in there, everybody in the building was fighting—a lot of aggression and screaming. It sounds a little bit like the environment that was described. But her presence in the building, she said, over time—it took some time—but the fact that she was this one being who only had love and concentration and peace in her heart and mind, that vibration started to permeate the whole apartment building. She said that over time, first people started coming to her for advice and for teachings, but the whole environment of that apartment building changed because of how she was.

We may not yet be at the level of Dipa Ma, but we can track in that direction and just see what kind of influence we can have through our being, if we have come to some place of repose, of ease in the situation. It's challenging—there's no doubt about that. But I would really take it on as a situation of interest. How can I investigate this, both in terms of how I'm relating to my own mind and then what I'm bringing to the mix of the environment?

There were quite a number of questions—the same question that a number of you asked—to see if I could further differentiate conceit and wrong view. It wasn't so clear what necessarily the difference was.

I can get very excited talking about the Dharma, so let me just settle back for a moment.

As a preface to this discussion, just as with the example of the cup and how we can either see it as a cup or at a deeper level as just electrons and atoms, so too with these different experiences like conceit or wrong view—there are many different levels at which we could explore them. I was going for a middle level. The most superficial level

would be just the conceptual, a kind of definition. The middle level that I was trying to engage was to understand the concepts, but also to explore how do we feel them, how do we experience them in our practice. That's what I was aiming for.

There is a deeper level, which is gone into in tremendous detail in the Buddhist psychology called the Abhidhamma—this super detailed analysis of all the different states and kinds of consciousness, all the different mental factors, and how they combine and relate in different ways. That would be like going to the subatomic particle level. I didn't go to that level because I don't know about it. I'm not an Abhidhamma scholar. And for me, even though it's really interesting, we don't need that level of detail in order to understand how these three proliferating tendencies function.

I wanted to say this because conceit, wrong view, and craving never operate alone in our minds. They're operating in conjunction with other mental factors. If you were interested, either through your own study or through going to a teacher who was really an expert in the Abhidhamma, you could explore the relationship of all these different mental factors. But as I said, that's not my area of expertise—I haven't really studied it in detail. So I'm talking about just this mid-level understanding.

Wrong view is really a belief. Conceit and craving, in the way we experience them, are more embodied experiences. When we're identified with some sense of "I" or "I am," or with craving, there's something quite tangible in our experience that we can recognize when we're "I am-ing" or wanting or thirsting for something. Whereas with wrong view, it's not so much that felt experience—it's the underlying belief about something.

The reason this is so important requires me to talk about another framework for a moment. Beliefs, strongly held beliefs, are extremely difficult to dislodge. The Buddha talked about three distortions of our understanding—or three hallucinations. The first is hallucination or distortion of perception. The second is distortion or hallucination of mind. And the third is distortion or hallucination of view.

Distortion of perception is where we're simply misperceiving something. You're outside, you see a stick on the ground, you think it's a snake. We're just misperceiving. Well, that's fairly easily remedied. We just take a closer look and see, "Yeah, that's not a snake, it's a stick." But this happens a lot in different ways.

Distortions of mind are everything that happens in our minds based on the distortion of perception. We think it's a snake and then maybe we get afraid or interested, whatever. All of those mind states are distortions of mind based on the misperception. That too is not so hard to work through, because once we see clearly, our mind understands in an accurate way.

But distortion of view—when people hold a strong view, it doesn't matter what the evidence is. People can be so attached to the view that you could present the clearest evidence in the world and it's not going to make any difference. That's why view is very deep.

We see this a lot. For example, there are many people who simply refuse to believe in evolution, even though there's tremendous, overwhelming scientific evidence for it. You can present this evidence, but if people are holding some contrary view, the evidence is not going to make any difference. They're not going to give up that view. In politics, we see it a lot.

He said there's right view associated with taints or defilements, and right view which is not—which is tending towards liberation. So first, that first concept: I wouldn't have put those two together. Right view, but still with desire or greed? But the Buddha was pointing out that yes, when we're living in this conventional world—the world of being, just the way of our normal lives—right view is understanding what actions bring about happiness. We talk about, "Oh yes, if you practice generosity, if you practice loving-kindness, this is going to bring about different kinds of happiness for you." So it's very worldly, and it could even be that on this level, right view associated with taints, we might be practicing generosity in order to have the abundance that comes from it, karmically. Do you understand? So there is craving involved, there's desire, but it's right view in terms of understanding the cause and effect. Yes, generosity brings abundance. Loving-kindness brings good relationships. There is a cause and effect. So this is right view connected still to our mundane, conventional, relative world.

And then there's the right view concerned with liberation. So just to use that example of generosity: practicing while wanting the result of it—that's the first kind of right view. But if we practice generosity understanding and really seeing that in the moment of generosity, that's a moment of non-clinging, and that's why we're practicing it—as a vehicle for non-clinging—so that's the right view that leads to liberation. So you're just getting some idea of these mind states: right view and wrong view, likewise conceit and craving. There's a lot of richness to them that I didn't go into yesterday, but you might explore on your own if you're interested.

So again, just to encapsulate: wrong view or right view is a belief, and this belief can be very deep within us. The belief is either in accordance with the Dhamma, with the truth, or it's not—which then becomes wrong view, wrong belief. Craving is that embodied, felt sense of thirsting for or wanting something. We can feel it. And the same thing with conceit. Just some of the examples I gave yesterday: when I was feeling down on myself for having wasted some time, that conceit had a visceral feeling to it and it affected my mood. In that way, it was very tangible. It wasn't just a belief—it was something deeply felt.

One more little point in this. It's like every question can become a whole hour Dhamma talk. But what's interesting to me is that this path of awakening happens in stages. Within our tradition, it's said that enlightenment happens in four stages, and the first stage of awakening is called stream entry, or entering the stream leading to enlightenment.

Wrong view is uprooted at this first stage of awakening, because we've gone beyond —we've had that experience of the unconditioned, of nibbāna, going beyond this mind-body process. And so we see completely clearly that this mind-body process is not self, out of that experience. That is the big transformation that happens in that moment: the understanding of selflessness. So wrong view is uprooted; it doesn't arise again in the stream of our consciousness.

However, craving is not uprooted until the third stage of awakening, and conceit is not uprooted until the fourth and final stage of awakening. So this gets interesting. Even though conceit is all around "I am," if we have seen through the wrong view of self, even though the habit pattern of the comparing mind, for example—

That habit pattern is deep and will continue all the way to full enlightenment. But after we have seen into the truth of selflessness, we no longer take the "I am-ing" to be self. We just see, "Oh yes, this is simply a habit pattern of the mind that is very deep. It's going to be with us for quite a while." But it has lost its power—we've cut the root of it. Because we no longer take it to be self, it will be dying on the vine. It may take a while; we'll need to progress further along the path. But inevitably, we will be freeing ourselves from it, because we've cut the root of that belief: "This is me, this is I."

Craving works the same way. Craving is a pattern in the mind. It's a habit. Conceit is a habit. Craving is a habit. And these habits continue even once we understand the selfless nature of it all. So perhaps this has helped to distinguish between wrong and right view on one hand, and conceit and craving on the other.

There was one question which comes up frequently in different forms, something I've talked about many times. The question was essentially: "I'm still grappling with the concept that there is no self." Not surprising—many of us grapple with this notion. What does non-self mean?

We want to understand that words like "self" or "I" are designations for something. They are not existing things in themselves. Let me give you an example. Imagine a river. Someone asks, "What's a river?" You say, "Well, it's the flowing water in a certain configuration—a certain pattern." The word "river" is a designation for that flowing stream of water. It's not that the river is something apart from that. It's not that the river is a thing in and of itself to which the water belongs. It's simply a designation for that flowing water.

Self is a designation for this flowing stream of mind-body phenomena. We could use that term, and we could say, "Yes, there is a self," if we understand what's meant by it. This flowing of mind-body elements appears in a recognizable pattern. I get up in the morning, I look in the mirror, and I recognize who it is. It's not some chaotic mishmash of stuff. There's a recognizable pattern to the flow of changing elements. But it's not that this mind-body process belongs to a self. The word "self" or "Joseph" or "I"—it's just a word designating this flow of changing phenomena.

To say there's no self doesn't mean that nothing exists. It's still the same flow of mental and physical phenomena. It's not that we say "no self" and suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke. Everything remains exactly the same, except that we're seeing it clearly. We're not confusing the designation with the actual reality of experience—whether it's the flowing water of the river or the flowing movement of the mind-body process. That is the reality of what's happening, regardless of what it's called. We don't want to confuse terminology, a mere designation, for being a thing in itself. That is what non-self means.

So we don't lose anything. In seeing no self and understanding that, everything is just as it always was, but we're seeing it more clearly. We're not adding this wrong view that this mind-body process belongs to me.

I hope you understand that this whole notion of understanding selflessness may be easier than you think—if you understand actually what selflessness means. We can have all kinds of ideas, conjuring up different things about what no self means, and then we sometimes panic about it. I hope this was clear. That term "self" or "Joseph"—it's just a designation. It's not something in and of itself.

When we see that, our whole practice comes into harmony with understanding the laws governing the process of unfolding. This is what the Buddha pointed out. He said that in this unfolding process, some elements, some qualities lead to more suffering, while some qualities lead to greater happiness and peace. He simply pointed all this out. He said, "What would you like? Do you want more suffering, or would you like peace?" When we pose it that way, it seems fairly obvious.

Somebody made this comment—I'm trying to remember. It was expressed very beautifully. This is not exact, but it captures the essence of it: "People shrink from suffering, but love its causes." We find ourselves in that situation. None of us want to suffer, and yet we keep doing things out of ignorance that cause suffering.

This is the great gift of the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha simply pointed this out because he saw with such profound clarity what leads to what. In seeing that and learning about it, there can be the cultivation of wholesome qualities and the slow abandoning of unwholesome ones. All of this can be done without any notion of a reified self. It's simply understanding the laws governing the unfolding process.

CHAPTER 61

# Papañca, Part 2

Joseph Goldstein · 1h28

> *In this second talk on papañca, Joseph Goldstein delves into the liberating practices that free us from the proliferating tendencies of craving, conceit, and wrong view. Drawing from the Buddha's advice to his son Rāhula, Joseph presents the contemplation "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself" as a mantra of liberation applicable to all experience—the five khandhas of form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.*
>
> *Joseph offers several practical techniques for investigating non-self: holding the question "what is being known?" moment to moment, using passive voice to remove the subject from experience, and observing how phenomena continually fall away like water over a waterfall. He explores how working with the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) during walking meditation can dissolve the conceptual overlay of "leg" or "foot," revealing experience as simply impersonal natural phenomena—air element, earth element—that clearly belong to no one.*
>
> *The talk illuminates how releasing papañca naturally gives rise to the four brahmavihāras: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Joseph shares the story of Anuruddha's harmonious community life and Montaigne's profound friendship as examples of what becomes possible when we loosen the grip of self. Closing with the Buddha's final words—"subject to decay are all conditioned things, practice with diligence"—Joseph encourages us to apply these teachings in daily life, recognizing that even brief moments of freedom from self-construction bring genuine peace.*

We'll begin this session, as usual, with a fifteen-minute sitting. Find some relaxed and alert posture and settle in. Maybe begin just by taking a few deep breaths as a way of settling into the body. As you close your eyes or lower them, soften the eyes. Relax the shoulders. Relax the jaw and the chest and the belly. Settle into the awareness of the whole body posture. Just sit and know you're sitting. If you found it helpful, you can use that phrase, "there is a body." It's a kind of mental note, just reminding oneself to settle into the awareness of the whole body posture. There is a body. Feeling the whole body sitting.

With that open framework, be mindful of what you become aware of within it. This would include sounds that are appearing and disappearing, the sensations of the body breathing. Be mindful of any other strong bodily sensations that call your attention

within that larger framework—there is a body. Just feeling them, being with them as they change, and resting again in the awareness "there is a body" when they're no longer predominant.

Within that framework—there is a body—where sounds are maybe coming, sensations of the body breathing, other predominant bodily sensations—also be alert and mindful for the arising, the appearance of thoughts or images in the mind. Notice where in that process you become aware of them. Are you aware of the thought after it's already over, in the middle, or just as it arises? See it without judgment, just noticing how your process is unfolding.

Also notice, as objects of attention, any predominant mind states or emotions that may be present. Maybe one of the hindrances—desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. It may be more positive mind states: calm, peace, contentment, interest. Just notice the particular mind state or emotion. Noting them is helpful as a way of being with them without identifying with them. Settle back in the awareness of the frame "there is a body," and then be mindful of whatever appears, whatever arises within that frame, noticing its changing nature.

When you're ready, you can slowly, gently open your eyes. And again, be mindful of seeing. Even perhaps for a moment or two, just note "seeing, seeing." It helps to reinforce the possibility of being mindful as we're seeing, going through the day. This itself is its own interesting exercise.

---

So, we continue with our discussion. This is talk "Papañca II," and we'll explore another aspect of it—hopefully a freeing aspect.

As you know, in the last couple of days we've discussed in some detail these powerful proliferating tendencies of mind and how they construct our reality, how they construct our lived experience. As you now know, they are all very much rooted in the tendency of craving, conceit, and wrong view, which are all rooted in the sense of self. Not only are they rooted in the sense of self, they further strengthen and condition the sense of self. So the question and challenge for all of us is understanding how to weaken and ultimately free ourselves from these powerful tendencies of the mind, from the source of difficulty and suffering in our lives.

The general principle—a quite obvious one, given everything we've talked about—was taught by the Buddha to his son, Rāhula. The name of this discourse in the text is "The Buddha's Advice to Rāhula."

The story goes that the Buddha and his son Rāhula were going on alms round in the morning to collect food. As they were walking on alms round, before they got into the village, Rāhula was looking at the physical form of the Buddha—how beautiful it was, a kind of perfection of physical form, physical beauty. In Rāhula's mind, he was starting to delight in the fact that he too resembled his father, seeing the beauty of his father's physical perfection and then reflecting on his resemblance to that.

Does that sound like one of the proliferating tendencies?

Well, the Buddha, being the Buddha, knew what was going on in Rahula's mind. One had to be very careful about one's thoughts in the presence of the Buddha. So the Buddha knew, and he stopped, turned around, and addressed Rahula. This was the background to this particular teaching.

I'm just going to quote a few lines from the actual discourse. "Then the Blessed One, the Buddha, looked back and addressed Rahula thus." Now, Rahula—he's really addressing us. So listen to these words as if we were following the Buddha on alms round, having these thoughts, and the Buddha is turning around and talking to us.

"Any kind of material form should be seen as it actually is, with perfect wisdom. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself. Any kind of physical form should be understood with perfect wisdom. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

Then Rahula asked, "Does this apply only to material form?" And the Buddha elaborated: "No, it includes material form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness"—which are the five aggregates. That's really the template the Buddha often used. We read it often in the suttas as a way of describing all lived experience. These are the five components, the five building blocks: material elements and form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. In other words, everything. This is everything we experience. So the Buddha is saying to apply this teaching to every aspect of what we experience. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.

Clearly this teaching is a corrective to the ways we create and strengthen and manifest the sense of self in our lives. It's directly addressing craving, conceit, and wrong view. We could think of it almost as a kind of mantra of liberation—this mantra reminding us of what frees the mind.

I came across a line by the British poet Philip Larkin which, in some way perhaps unbeknownst to him, really captured the motivation for undertaking this inquiry. I love this line. He said, "I'm tired of going around pretending to be me." I think in a way that captures it. We're all going around pretending to be yourself and pretending to be me. It's tiresome.

So the challenge, of course, is finding different ways of remembering this. We can hear this instruction and this mantra of liberation, but how do we actually put it into practice? How do we do it and see for ourselves the benefit—experiencing the ease and the joy of release from the imprisoning construct of self?

Just to give another little poetic encouragement highlighting this aspect, the kind of ease of it: there's a Polish poet, Anna Swir, and a very short poem called "A Double Rapture." Would you like to have a double rapture? Here it is, a very simple instruction: "Because there is no me, I feel how much there is no me."

That's the double rapture. There's no me in the first place, and because I feel how much there is no me. So again, it just highlights the possibility of really greater freedom, greater ease. We're coming out of, as I said, the imprisonment of a construct.

So it's definitely worth investigating—not just to believe it because someone says it, but to see for ourselves. That's where the transformation takes place. Fortunately, a key to understanding selflessness and to freeing ourselves, at least to some extent, from the grip of papañca—remember, papañca means these proliferating tendencies—is something that is completely obvious but almost always overlooked. And that is by investigating with greater precision and refinement the truth of change.

Just a little anecdote. Someone once asked Suzuki Roshi, who was the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center and was a wonderful teacher—

And one of his books was called *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*, which was really a powerful influence when it came out back in the seventies, perhaps. So someone, one of his students, asked him, "You know, I've been listening to your teachings for so long. I really don't understand it. I don't understand what you've been teaching. Can you express the essence of the Buddhist teaching in a nutshell?" Suzuki Roshi just thought for a moment, and then he said, "Everything changes." Not complicated. Everything changes.

Of course, we all know this intellectually. This is not an esoteric truth, somewhat like selflessness, which is not obvious right away. The truth of change—we all know that things change. But what's so interesting is we know it on one level, yet we don't apply the insight of that seeing or knowing into our unfolding lives. We're not living that insight for the most part. So there's a lot of profundity in those two words: everything changes.

The Buddha often used similes to bring his teachings home, because sometimes a simple image can convey more, and more immediately, than maybe a whole hour's discourse. So I'd like to offer one image, expressed in a very short poem called "Samsara." It's just two lines: "Samsara, castles of sand at water's edge."

Just take a moment to conjure that image in your mind. Sandcastles at water's edge. The fragility and the impermanence of that construction is so clear. A wave comes and washes our precious sandcastle away with all its finely crafted turrets and towers, everything we put so much energy into. Or maybe a heavy rain comes and it's destroyed. Or maybe toward the end of the day, a whole gaggle of kids comes along and just stomps on our sandcastle. It's so clear with that image—castles of sand at water's edge—that the sandcastle has no intrinsic stable existence. The castle is really just a pile of sand. Obviously at water's edge, or really any place else, it's very vulnerable to changing conditions. Hopefully this is not hard to see or to understand. It seems very obvious.

So what does the sandcastle represent? Everything constructed. Everything arising out of conditions. These are the sandcastles of our lives. And what's so profound is that everything constructed, everything arising out of conditions, is everything. Every aspect of life, of the world—our bodies, our minds, the physical world—on every level of magnitude, things are in flux. We could think of galaxies or stars or planets. Civilizations arise and pass away. Individuals with all their various thoughts and feelings are sandcastles. Cells, molecules, atoms, subatomic particles—on every level of existence, this truth of change manifests. Nothing at all is stable and fixed.

When we investigate our own experience of impermanence through mindfulness, with greater and greater refinement, we see that nothing really lasts long enough to constitute a stable self. And we see that for ourselves. At this point, through the greater insight or refinement or perception of change, we are actually entering into the understanding of non-self, of selflessness. We see this in our meditation practice, but also if we're mindful just in our lives throughout the day. Our bodies are always changing. Thoughts come and go. Our emotions are like clouds passing through the mind. Consciousness even is arising and passing away with each new object of attention.

What we really call "self" or "Joseph" is not some substantial, solid, fixed reality, but a kaleidoscope—a kaleidoscopic appearance of changing conditions. We can see this. It's not some deeply hidden truth. We really just need to pay attention to the flow of our experience.

And we also see—and this is important to round out the picture—that all these changing conditions are following natural laws. They're not simply subject to our will and wishes. The body will age and die regardless of what we think about that, because it's just natural law. This is the Dharma. This is the law. This is the nature of things. And the mind, as we know very clearly, seems to have a mind of its own. "Yes, I'm going to sit down and be perfectly concentrated for this hour." Well, it doesn't necessarily follow our wish.

This aspect is another meaning of non-self. In Pali, the word for non-self is *anattā*.

So it's usually translated as non-self, but one of its characteristics, one of its manifestations, is that things are ungovernable—meaning we can't control them simply by our willing or our wishing.

But there's one other aspect that's important to bring into the picture, and that is that this process of change is not happening unlawfully. It's not chaotic, not just this kind of big mix of phenomena that we're swirling around in. No, things are changing, are in this flow, but in a lawful manner. So there is the possibility of directing outcomes if we understand the causes and conditions for something to arise. It's not simply because we wish it. It's because we understand that in this lawful process of change, things arise out of conditions. And if we understand the conditions, then we can help direct or influence the unfolding course of our lives.

And of course, this is the whole basis of dharma practice. As I mentioned yesterday, I think this is the great gift of the Buddha's teachings—because he understood so clearly the causes and conditions behind suffering in our lives, and behind greater freedom and ease in our lives.

So given this deep understanding and experience of continual change—and we need to have the experience, as I said, we already know it intellectually, so that's not the problem—we have to embody it. We have to drop into the actual experience of things changing moment to moment. This is what our meditation is about. This is what mindfulness is about.

As we drop further into this experience of continual change, like the flowing water of the river I mentioned yesterday, and seeing that conditions are not subject to our will, then the Buddha's instruction to Rāhula—and to us—becomes a very direct pointing to the possibility of freedom. He's giving us an instruction here: See everything with perfect wisdom. This, and this includes everything in the mind, in the body, in the world, the cosmos—see everything with perfect wisdom: This is not mine. This is not I. This is not myself.

We can practice this, we can put it into practice, not only in times of formal meditation but also in the daily activities of our lives—and not stay satisfied or just follow along in our conventional way of understanding things, our superficial way of understanding things. We can practice disentangling from the papañca of craving, conceit, and wrong view. This can actually be practiced.

Of course, the very big question remains: Okay, how do I practice? What do I actually do?

Going back to the discourse of the Buddha instructing Rāhula, there's a nice little human touch here. It says that even though Rāhula was following the Buddha into the village for alms round, he had the thought—after being instructed and exhorted by the Buddha—that he would not simply go on into the village for food. And so he turned around, all inspired to put the teaching into practice, sat down at the root of a tree, and meditated for the day.

Happily for us, there are some simple ways of exploring this quite profound teaching even when we're eating. We don't necessarily have to turn back and find the root of a tree. Even in the act of eating, if we are paying attention in a certain way, we can be exploring this instruction.

One practice I've found particularly helpful, whether in eating or in anything else—this is a practice that can be applied at any time—is holding a question in mind, holding it from moment to moment: What is being known? Just moment to moment, in whatever we're doing, but we could say in this case, eating. We're engaged in eating, and we hold that question: moment after moment, what is actually being known?

With eating, for example, the conventional answer if somebody asked, "Well, what are you doing?" would be, "I'm eating." That would be the conventional response. But right there, in that response, already there's an I. "I'm eating," and then it becomes "my food." It's so interesting—all of that is just strengthening, unknowingly, that conventional way of responding and perceiving. Unknowingly, we're strengthening the sense of I, strengthening the sense of self.

Just for a moment, reflect on how pervasive these proliferating tendencies are. They impact almost everything we do. We're continually reinforcing the sense of I, the belief in a self doing it all.

But with strong mindfulness and investigation and interest—interest is a key component here—and with the question "What is actually being known?"—a simple question—we see that experiences are arising and passing away moment after moment. What we call eating, what we give that general name or "I'm eating," is really sequential moments of the sensations of chewing, of tasting, of swallowing.

Perhaps interspersed with moments of sounds being known or thoughts being known.

So this is what's happening. It's like moment after moment, just these different momentary experiences arising and passing, arising and passing. And we see the changing nature so clearly. It's so obvious when the mind settles back into each of these experiences, just with bare attention. What is being known? Chewing. Tasting. Maybe seeing. Hearing. Thinking. Just moment after moment, we're tracking it.

But when we're settled back in that way, there's no forward leaning into the next moment. And in that, we're no longer craving for the next taste. Have you noticed how often—many people, we can be eating and chewing food, and even when there's still food in our mouth, we're reaching for more? So what's that about? It's just the mind of craving. We've chewed out the taste, and there's that craving for another taste, even as we still have food in our mouth. This is just the normal habit for very many people.

This practice of settling back—okay, what's being known?—then we really are settled back into the moment. And so there is no proliferation of mind, no reaching out, no leaning forward. There's no sense of "I am the one eating." It's just a sound being known or a taste being known. So we've freed ourselves, at least for those moments. We've freed the mind from craving, from conceit. There's no sense of a self doing anything. There's just that experience being known. There's no agitation, there's no perturbation of mind.

I hope you see this is not complicated. The real challenge is not in doing it. It's remembering to do it. We just get so caught up in the busyness of our lives that we forget that the Dharma can be lived, can be applied, whatever we're doing. We don't want to miss those opportunities.

Here I want to emphasize the importance of language and how language can deeply condition our understanding, often without our realizing it. Yesterday I mentioned how we misunderstand the meaning of self, ascribing to it some substantial fixed reality when really it's only a word designating a process. How we understand the use of language really changes how we perceive things.

In this instance, in this exercise of holding the question of what is being known moment after moment, it changes our usual linguistic framework from the active voice to the passive voice. In the active voice, there's a subject, a verb, an object, and so we would say, "I'm eating food," or "I'm going here or there," or "I'm hearing a sound." But this use of language, the active voice, as you can see, already posits the I—just in our normal way of conversation. I'm doing this, I'm doing that.

I'm often remembering Descartes' famous dictum: "I think, therefore I am," as if somehow that proved the existence of an I. But already "I think" posits the I. So it's really saying "I, therefore I." Instead of eliminating the I: thinking, therefore thinking.

The passive voice takes the subject out of it. Even though writing coaches will say, "Try to avoid the passive voice, it's not an energized way of writing," for the purpose of meditative insight, I have found this tremendously useful. I've used this a lot in my practice. It reveals so much and actually makes the practice much easier, because it's not an I trying to do something.

So instead of "I'm knowing the taste," it's "a taste being known." And that phrase, "a taste being known," there's no subject. It just describes the actual experience of what's happening. This application of this linguistic tool can be very helpful, and I've used it a lot.

Just do the same experiment we did yesterday, moving the arm, but here with a different purpose. Yesterday I was talking about how we can use it to be mindfulness that's feeling it rather than watching it—that use of language. But here we can just move the arm and it's just the movement being known. Not "I'm knowing the movement." Just moving the arm.

So as you do that—and I hope you are; I can't see you, but I hope you're following instructions—you're just moving your arm and really getting to the experience of moving it. It's just the movement being known. Does it take any effort at all? The knowing is happening simultaneously as we're paying attention.

This way of understanding, this way of framing experience, not only takes the subject out of it, not only takes the I out of it, it also takes unnecessary efforting out of it. Things become so useful. Okay, this is a whole long pitch for using this.

What's being known moment after moment—this reveals very clearly, very simply, very immediately the truth of change. Experiences are just changing moment after moment through the successive moments. When we are not seeing this and we're back

more in that active conventional mode of "I'm eating," it would be easy to come to the conclusion that there's some more or less permanent I who's doing all of this. It's in that way that we get ensconced in wrong view.

There's a lot of power in this way of seeing impermanence through the passive voice, because not only are we seeing the change, but the way we're framing it already takes the subject out of it. So it's very liberating.

What I would suggest, if you're inspired to explore this further, is just to take five or ten minutes at a time. You don't have to think, "Oh, I have to be doing this all day long"—which, if you could, would be fine—but just start small. Just five minutes where your intention, whether it's eating or doing anything else... You could be going for a walk and just asking, okay, moment after moment, what's being known? It might be a movement. It might be the feeling of the breeze on your face. It might be the feeling of the sun, or a thought, or a sound. You'll have the same experience of the flow of phenomena, the momentary change that's going on.

There's one other very direct, immediate, and in a way quite startling practice for seeing with tremendous immediacy the profundity of change. And that is seeing how things are continually falling away. It's almost like being at the edge of a waterfall, and the water just keeps falling over the edge.

One time I was just going for a walk around here in Barre, trying to be mindful. And then I started reflecting: well, what happened to the experience of the step a minute ago? And I realized it's gone. Completely gone. It's past. And then: what about a step thirty seconds ago? Gone, completely gone. And so I brought it right up to the present moment stepping, and could see that every moment things are falling away. Every moment it's water over the waterfall.

It's not difficult to do this. It's just tuning the mind into it, because this is what's happening. You might try it. It might be easy if you go through the process that I did—start with a minute ago or five minutes ago, because it's so obvious that it's gone—and then work your way up to just this very last moment.

Gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.

So we have the very embodied experience of this continual change, this continual falling away. Now in that space, in that experience, it's really quite profound because first we see the impossibility of clinging—things are just falling away moment after moment. So the clinging falls away. The "I" falls away. It's almost like everything falls away.

And so we really begin to experience the mind that's free of these papañca, free of clinging, free of grasping. We get a taste of a possibility of the mind that is not holding on to anything.

You see, in both of these exercises, they're not difficult to do. One doesn't have to have been practicing for thirty years in order to do this. They're simple exercises, ones that I've just played with and explored in my own practice. Coming out of retreat, they're very alive for me, and that's why I wanted to share them.

Another approach that I played with on retreat, which was equally revealing and quite interesting to me, also had to do with exploring "not mine, not I, not myself." This was using the framework of the physical elements—not in an ongoing systematic way, because the practice on the elements is its own meditative technique, and there are ways of developing it very consistently over time. But I was using it just enough to reveal the important role, again, of language in how we experience things.

Let me explain this a little more. Just as a reminder, in the classical texts the Buddha used a kind of shorthand, common in those times, to describe the physical elements in terms of the felt experience of them. So here, when we talk of the physical elements, we're not talking about the periodic table of elements that we learn in chemistry—that's something different. We're using this very classical formulation of the physical elements that was common at that time: the elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The Buddha used that as shorthand for describing how we actually experience them.

So for example, earth is hardness. The earth element is the experience of hardness. Fire element is the experience of warmth or coldness—its absence. Air element is movement and pressure. Water element represents cohesion, which holds everything together.

I was doing walking meditation, and what I've noticed for a long time now—even before applying this teaching on the elements—is that even when we're being mindful in walking, really being pretty mindful and feeling the sensations of the movement and touch, there's often a subtle, almost subliminal background impression of "I'm walking." It's not something that's actively formulated in the mind, but without much reflection, if somebody asked me what I'm doing, I'd say, "I'm walking." So that conditioning is just so strong within us, and we carry it throughout the day.

Not only is there that very subtle background impression of "I'm walking," but I also notice that there's often, even as we're being mindful of the different sensations, a very minimal overlay of an image of the foot or leg. We're walking and we're feeling the movement, but it's almost as if the movement is contained within this almost invisible image—but it's there in the mind. Foot. Leg.

So for a short period of time, I started walking but noting the movement and the touch of each step using the framework of the elements. As I felt the forward movement, I would note it as "air" or "air element." And as I experienced the touch, the hardness as I touched the ground, I noted it as "earth" or "earth element." But I was also connecting that note—air element, earth element—to the felt experience of it, so it wasn't just this concept in my mind. It was connecting that language to the experience.

All this seems quite simple. It was really just a change of language. But again, I want to emphasize that it needed to connect the words to the experience. There was a striking shift just from this simple exercise. Because when I noted "air" or I noted "earth," connected to the experience of the movement and touch, the conceptual overlay of foot and leg completely disappeared. It was just air element, earth element.

And it was so clear that air element, earth element doesn't belong to me. Would you ever say—unlike "my leg"—would you ever say "my earth element" or "my air"? No. When we drop down to that level, that particular proliferating tendency falls away.

It was so clear. It's just the movement, or air element. Earth element. So the concept of leg fell away, it clearly wasn't mine, and there clearly wasn't any "I am" in it. Again, would you ever say "I am the earth element" or "I am..."? No. Because we've dropped down to a different level of understanding, a different level of perception, where we're seeing things really as they are—free of the proliferating tendencies which then condition our perception of things and condition the reinforcing of the view of self.

So I hope you're getting some idea. There are practices that we do that are not complicated. Any of us can do them if we have the interest. And there's an immediacy to the effect.

So we get a real, genuine, deep insight into both the truth of impermanence and the truth of the non-personal nature of experience. Air element, earth element—these are non-personal. This is just nature. This is just nature manifesting its nature.

I'd really encourage you, again, if you have the interest, to explore this for yourself, because I found it very, very revealing. And even since I've been out of retreat now for a week or so and getting very busy again and involved in the world, quite amazingly, now even when I go for a walk, having practiced this on retreat, I find my mind just slipping right into that way of experiencing each step.

One of the benefits of this—and it's a big benefit—is that in times of mental distress or mental suffering, which almost always revolve around one papañca or other... You know, when we're really caught up in suffering or distress, very likely there's a mind with "I am" or "this is self" involved in that. So in times of some kind of mental unease, to drop into this level of perception—oh, air element, earth element—where those proliferating tendencies fall away, it takes us right out of the distress, right out of the suffering.

I hope you're as interested in this as I am, because it just seems so compelling. It has to do with how suffering is created in our lives and how to be free. Often when the Buddha was asked, "What do you teach?" he would say he teaches just one thing: suffering and its end. And often we think, "Oh, yes, well, I'll practice for a hundred lifetimes and maybe I'll get enlightened by the end of it and come to the end of suffering." Well, that may be the case, but we can actually come to the end of suffering, even if it's for a few minutes at a time, when we apply the teachings. We don't want to postpone it. We want to actually use this as a very effective tool for well-being in our lives.

And perhaps if your interest is not quite piqued enough yet, maybe this one last piece will be that final boost to inspire you. This teaching on the elements is exactly the teaching that the Buddha gave to Rāhula. He went on, after saying that everything should be seen with perfect wisdom as "this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself," to say that you should see form in this way. You should see all of the aggregates in this way. And then, describing this exercise on the elements, he said—Rāhula, this is right from the discourse—"Now both the internal and external earth element is simply earth element. And it should be seen as it actually is with perfect wisdom: this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself." And then the same with all the other elements.

So the Buddha was using this practice of working with the elements to cut through the conceit of "I am" that was in Rāhula's mind. If the Buddha were giving us that instruction, wouldn't you be inspired to go out and practice it? Even if we don't turn back from getting our breakfast, we can actually apply it as we're eating breakfast.

I would really like to encourage you to play with all of these various suggestions: things being known, using that passive voice of knowing; seeing the impermanence of things falling away; bringing that awareness right into this very last moment—falling away, falling away, falling away—and just see what that feels like. See what you learn from that. Or use this exercise on the elements.

As we practice this more and more and learn to touch the experience, at least at times, this experience of non-self, of selflessness—that this whole mind-body process is that flow of changing experiences—we can do this even as we're engaged in the normal activities of our lives, as well as in formal practice. We see that the natural expression of not-mine-ness, "this is not mine," results very often in spontaneous expressions of generosity. When we're not holding on to things being mine, generosity can flow much more easily. And in being generous, we are also weakening the sense of self. We're letting go. We're reinforcing that sense of not-mine-ness.

I had a very clear experience of this, which I've mentioned in various dharma talks over the years, but it was a very vivid experience. When I came back from India for the last time—this was in 1974—that summer I was teaching at the first summer session of Naropa Institute, the Buddhist college that Trungpa Rinpoche set up in Boulder, Colorado. I was teaching a course in vipassanā, and they had given me a faculty apartment to live in.

It turns out that of all my friends who had been in India together, I was the first one back and the first one who had a job of any kind, and therefore the only one with an apartment. So as my friends came back from India during that summer, the question was, "Where should we go? Let's go visit—we'll stay with Joseph in Boulder." These were very close friends from India. But I can't remember now exactly how many—it was more than two, perhaps four or five, maybe six friends showed up at my apartment in Boulder, and I was working pretty hard.

I was teaching many sessions a day and could feel myself getting a little tight. This was just a one-bedroom apartment, and all these friends were piled in sleeping bags on the floor. I could feel myself getting contracted by this.

But then I had what was like a mini satori. At a certain point, very fortunately for me, I began to question: well, why am I so upset? Because in India, when we were there together, we shared much more crowded circumstances and there was no problem.

I realized that all the distress, all the suffering was coming about because I was thinking of it as *my* apartment. It was that simple. This apartment is mine, and these people are invading it. So naturally I resisted, I didn't like this—even though they were

close friends. As soon as I let go of that idea, "this is mine," it just became a shared space, as we had done so many times in India. There was no problem at all. In fact, I then got to enjoy the presence and company of these dear friends.

So it has very practical applications for how we relate to our circumstances in the world. It might be interesting, whenever we feel contracted in one way or another, to investigate. This feeling of "this is mine" is not necessarily the only cause of that contraction, but it could be a not uncommon cause. It might be worth looking in those times when we feel contracted: Am I holding onto something as being mine? Is there a possibility, and is it appropriate, to let go of that idea? To simply say, okay, this is not mine—this is just the space we're all sharing.

I want to emphasize, though, in suggesting this, it's not to put it out as an absolute, because there could well be times when it's totally appropriate to set boundaries and to say, "No, this is not right." We have to look with clarity at the situation and apply the appropriate remedy. But this could be one avenue that we perhaps don't think of very often—to see in a particular situation whether this would be appropriate and whether it would actually ease our suffering.

We can also see how our deepening understanding of non-self, by cutting through the proliferating tendencies of craving, conceit, and wrong view, expresses itself in the lived experiences of the four brahma viharas. As most of you probably know, these are those qualities of mind: loving-kindness or metta, compassion, empathetic joy where we take happiness in the happiness of others, and equanimity.

When I think of the Buddha and the liberated mind, what I imagine is this great expanse of awareness, free of any contraction of self, and also suffused with these four qualities. It's a beautiful expression of what's possible for us as human beings—where we're not constricted in this prison of self and it manifests through these beautiful qualities.

I wanted to give just a few examples of how each of these qualities comes about through the letting go of papañca. As we let go of craving, conceit, and wrong view, they express themselves in these very beautiful ways. There could be many examples for each of them, but I'll share ones that came to mind.

There's one discourse where one of the great disciples of the Buddha, named Anuruddha, was in a park or forest grove with two other monks practicing. The Buddha came by to meet with them, and I'll read just a little piece of the discourse.

The Buddha is speaking: "I hope, Anuruddha, that you are all living in concord with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes."

Anuruddha replied, "Surely we are living in concord in just this way."

The Buddha said, "But Anuruddha, how do you live thus?"

"Venerable sir, as to that, I maintain bodily acts of loving-kindness towards those venerable ones, both openly and privately. I maintain verbal acts of loving-kindness, mental acts of loving-kindness, both openly and privately." And here's the sentence that really jumped out at me: "I consider, why should I not set aside what I wish to do and do what these venerable ones wish to do? That is how we are living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes."

When we are not in the grip of "this is mine," "this I am," "this is myself," then it's easy to have that thought: Why should I not set aside what I want to do and do what these others would like to do? Because we're not holding on. We're not holding on to the notion, "Oh, I need this."

Again, we need to see when this is appropriate, because there might be situations where, for whatever reason, we should be doing what we wish to do. I'm not making this into an absolute dictum. But I've found in my own life that this understanding can come into play a lot. I try to live like this when I'm with friends and people—where should we go to dinner? Where would you like to go?

I'm happy to go wherever you'd like to go. It's not a big thing. But as we let this settle into the way we live, this is an expression of loving-kindness, of mettā. And it comes about when we've loosened the grip of "I" and "me" and "mine." Our lives just become an expression of generosity and loving-kindness.

Now let's consider compassion. There are two examples I want to give of how loosening the papañca opens us to compassion.

One experience happened when I was still practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya. For those of you who have been in India, you will probably recognize this—generally the situation of dogs in India is terrible. Often there are just wild dogs, not aggressively wild, but they're not people's pets. There are many, many just wandering around the village, and they're really in pitiable condition, often with mange, starving. It's hard.

Sometimes I'd be in the village at one of the tea shops, the chai shops, just having a cup of tea and maybe some sweets. And these dogs would come up. I noticed two very different reactions in my mind. When I was caught in "Oh, I just want to enjoy my cup of tea and have these sweets"—then I had no patience. I didn't even want to see. It was too disturbing to see, and it was disturbing the enjoyment of my tea.

But at other times, when my heart was a little more open and relaxed and I wasn't in the grip of the papañca, then I actually let the suffering of those dogs in. Instead of trying to keep it out, I would just sit there having my tea, but I really opened to the experience of those poor dogs. Instead of resistance or avoidance, all that arose was compassion. The suffering was so obvious. And as the compassion came up, I'd respond very differently—throw them a little food, whatever.

Where does that difference of response come from? From whether the papañca were there or not there. Do you see that? These brahmavihāras, these beautiful qualities of mind, come about quite naturally when we can step out of the constricting nature of "I," "me," "mine." We want to see that and really see it in our own lives.

So how does muditā—sympathetic joy—come about? This is one of my favorite examples because I think it's pretty unusual. This is a little story about the French essayist Montaigne. He lived back a few hundred years—the 1500s, 1600s, something like that. He had this profoundly important friendship with someone, a platonic relationship, but of profound importance in his life.

This is what he wrote about his way of relating in this relationship. I find it quite striking. From Montaigne:

"In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good rather than to have him do good to me, I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

Isn't that pretty amazing in terms of relationships? This is genuine muditā—taking joy, taking delight in the happiness of others. I don't know how common this is in people's normal relationships. "I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

I find that tremendously insightful and beautiful. That would be a beautiful way to be in relationship to people.

Because again, we're taking the I, me, mine out of it. And it just opens up the possibility of these wonderfully beautiful qualities of heart and mind.

So the last of them is equanimity. This is expressed so clearly in one very pithy teaching of the Buddha—the possibility of profound equanimity that points directly to liberation. And we can begin to experience it, again, even just for a few moments at a time.

The Buddha said: when seeing impermanence—which I talked a lot about how we might do—in seeing impermanence, and we can see this for ourselves, the mind doesn't cling. Things are continually passing away. When not clinging, it is not agitated.

We should check that out for ourselves. When we're in that flow of impermanence, see if there's clinging or not. Don't just believe it, but I think you'll see that there is no clinging because things are continually changing. And when not clinging, see whether there's agitation in the mind or not. We put it to the test. When not clinging, it is not agitated. When the mind doesn't cling, it is not agitated. When not agitated, it personally realizes Nibbana, the highest peace.

Again, as we let go of the proliferating tendencies, as we cut through them, we really can taste a very profound peace.

I'd like to close with the last words of the Buddha. Just imagine the scene. The Buddha spent forty-five years teaching tremendously devoted disciples, many of whom had realized enlightenment or stages of enlightenment, or were on the path to stages of awakening. You can just imagine the moment—the Buddha is dying, these are his very last words. You can imagine the import they had. We should hear them in that way, really as if these are the Buddha's last words to us:

*With the light of perfect wisdom, dispel the darkness of ignorance. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Practice with heedfulness. Subject to decay are all conditioned things—sand castles at water's edge. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Practice with diligence.*

For all of us, we need to find ways in the very midst of our lives—in all the busyness of it, in the midst of all our worldly activities—to remember and put these teachings into practice. These are the practices that free the heart.

I find it inspiring to reflect on the fact that people have been practicing these teachings for thousands of years, realizing the benefit from their practice. Now it's up to us. It's like now it's our turn to put these teachings into practice and to carry the teachings forward.

So thank you. Let's just sit for a moment and let the words dissolve.

May all beings be at peace.

CHAPTER 62

# Questions & Responses

Joseph Goldstein · 1h34

> *In this interactive session, Joseph Goldstein responds to a wide range of practitioner questions, offering practical guidance rooted in deep meditative understanding. He begins with a striking personal anecdote about mindfulness of seeing, demonstrating how noting 'seeing' eliminated 95% of judgmental thoughts in the dining hall—a powerful illustration of how unacknowledged sense contact triggers papañca.*
>
> *The talk addresses fundamental questions about navigating selflessness (anattā) alongside conventional reality, explaining how mettā practice operates skillfully on the relative level while vipassanā reveals the ultimate truth of selfless phenomena. Goldstein offers nuanced guidance on right effort, using the metaphor of tuning a lute and introducing the framework of 'relaxed but not casual' alongside the skillful use of 'yes and no' in practice.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is his teaching on working with shame and guilt, sharing a personal experience where recognizing guilt as 'an ego trip' led to immediate liberation. He distinguishes between guilt (which reinforces the negative self) and remorse (which acknowledges unskillfulness while seeing it as part of the selfless flow). The session concludes with exploration of consciousness and knowing, drawing from both Theravāda analysis of momentary consciousness and Zen teachings on the unfindability of mind, exemplified through the Bodhidharma story: 'I've looked everywhere and cannot find it'—'There, it's already pacified.'*

Welcome back, everyone. We'll begin again with about fifteen minutes of meditation, lightly guided, now that you're all meditative pros.

Take a comfortable, alert meditative posture. It's helpful to start with a couple of deep breaths to settle into the body, relaxing, softening the eyes and the shoulders, the chest and the belly.

Beginning again, if it's helpful, with that frame: there is a body. Feeling the body sitting. Sit and know you're sitting. Simply notice what's being known moment after moment. It might be sounds. It might be the sensations of the body breathing. Let the mind be receptive, just receiving whatever appears with clarity and with precision.

You might become aware of other bodily sensations. Sometimes they're quite predominant and they call the attention. Other times you could settle into the awareness of the whole body and just be receptive or open to whatever subtle sensations there may

be throughout the body. Perhaps there's a sense of slight warmth or coolness, softness or tightness, maybe a subtle kind of vibration. There's no need to look for these sensations. Sometimes just sit in the awareness of the whole body and be receptive to whatever might show itself, whether very predominant or happening on a more subtle level.

Stay mindful and alert for whatever thoughts or images may appear in the mind. Sometimes thoughts or images slide in. They're not as impactful as a sensation or a sound, so often we miss the arising of them. Simply notice when in their process you become aware. Is it after it's over and you remember that it was there? Is it in the middle? Sometimes we do become aware of the thought or image just as it's arising. Simply notice this. See how the thoughts or images also arise and pass away, just like sounds.

Notice the quality of your mind, the mind state or the mood. Is one of the hindrances present? Is there boredom? Is there interest? Is the mind concentrated or restless? Just notice the basic quality of the mind, making that the object of mindfulness as well. These are also passing states, arising and passing just like thoughts, just like sounds.

Sometimes repeating the phrase in the mind—"there is a body"—just as a way of reminding yourself to settle back into the awareness of the whole body, the posture of the body sitting.

When you're ready, you can slowly open your eyes and become aware of seeing.

---

Before getting into the many interesting questions you sent in, I want to tell a little anecdote about the value of practicing being mindful of seeing, because it's not something that's talked about a lot. It actually can have tremendous benefit and implications for how we're living in the world.

This goes back quite a few years. I was on retreat at the retreat center at IMS, and I began to notice that whenever I would go into the dining room for one of the meals, my mind would simply have a comment or a judgment about everyone I saw. What they were wearing, how they were moving, they took too much food, they took too little food. It was ridiculous. But that's what my mind was doing.

As I saw this each time I would go into the dining room, at a certain point I became interested: Why is this? Why are these thoughts coming in the mind? They're so clearly useless. As I looked, I really learned something very important. All of those thoughts were arising because I was not being mindful of seeing. The seeing was happening, but

I was not noting "seeing." Because of that contact with visible objects—namely all the other people in the room—that's what triggered, for whatever reason of conditioning, that whole plethora of thoughts.

It was amazing. As soon as I started noting "seeing," which I did then, as soon as I would go into the dining room, that's all I would note. I wouldn't note anything else.

Just seeing, seeing as I went for the food, seeing as I sat down at the table, seeing. It was amazing. It eliminated about 95% of all that useless mental activity.

And I realized, as I think I mentioned earlier, that for many of us—perhaps most of us—the predominant sense experience we're having is visual. It's like we're living in the world of what's being seen, for those of us who have eyes in working order. And yet we're not mindful of that, because it doesn't impact us in the same way as a sudden sound might, or a sensation. So we easily become unaware, not mindful of seeing. And then we're living in this world of what's being seen with all the automatic reactions to what's being seen. We're caught up in that cycle of reactivity.

The remedy is very simple, if we can remember to do it: just practice periodically. Whether in walking meditation or in your daily activities, periodically spend some time —even for a few minutes at a time—reinforcing the noting: seeing, seeing, seeing. We're becoming more conscious of this very predominant sense experience that mostly we are not mindful of.

I wanted to share that with you because the impact was so striking and beneficial. It really just eliminated a lot of useless judgmental thoughts.

Okay, so now I'll get to the questions you sent in.

One question was: Could you talk about how to bring together the conventions of basic communication—which includes the mind, "I am," and self—with the deep understanding that there is no self? And then a somewhat related question really had to do with squaring selflessness and metta meditation. Basically, if one embraces selflessness, then to whom or what is one wishing happiness, safety, and peace? May your non-self be happy?

I want to emphasize that we can have—and it's a deepening part of our practice and realization—this exploration of the terrain of selflessness: not mine, not I, not myself. But at the same time, we can be easy about using conventional language. That's fine; there's no problem. It's really working on the different levels I talked about the other day: the relative level and the more ultimate level.

In the metta meditation, the loving-kindness practice, we are dealing not on the ultimate level but on the relative level—with the concept of beings, of individuals, and you could say of selves. But this is all the relative level, and that's fine. We live a lot on this level. There's no problem with engaging with it, especially if we understand that yes, this is skillful on this level, and we also understand from our meditative experience, or just our wisdom, that on the more ultimate level, it's really selfless.

But can you imagine doing the metta meditation: "May your five aggregates be at peace"? It doesn't quite ring right. Not that helpful.

So there's no need to make this a problem. There are two different levels. Doing the metta and engaging on the relative level in a skillful, wholesome way is beneficial. We're cultivating wholesome states of mind. And then in vipassana, in insight meditation, that's when we drop down to this other level and really understand and experience that what we're calling self or an individual is just this flow of changing phenomena moment after moment.

There's no problem engaging on both levels, and we need to engage on both levels because we're living on both levels. And as I said, the deeper our understanding of selflessness is, the more freely and easily we can engage on the relative level skillfully and with wholesome mind states. So they really work together. There's really not a problem.

Okay, so next there were a couple of questions about right effort. What are the characteristics of right effort? How strong is right effort? How much effort is there in right effort? One person wrote, "I have a pretty good idea that struggle is not helpful." And another question was, "What is the practical benefit of integrating right effort into my meditation practice? I had a hard time understanding specifically what that looks like in any given meditation session."

First, it's important to understand that right effort is one step of the Eightfold Path, and it's a crucial step. It might also be interesting to know that when the Buddha described the list called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment...

This is an expanded list from the usual seven factors of enlightenment. The list of 37 factors is comprised of many different lists, like the spiritual faculties, the factors of enlightenment, and the Eightfold Path. These are all put together in this list of 37. In that list, right effort appears more often than any other factor. So that may give you an idea that it's really essential. In one description, it says that right effort is the root or the source of all accomplishment. Without right effort, we don't get anything done, whether it's in the world or in our practice.

So then the challenge is: what makes effort right as opposed to wrong effort? This is a very delicate investigation, and it's a lifelong investigation. It's not that we play around with it a little bit and then think, "Oh, now I have it. This is the perfect balance of right effort." No, it's like balancing on a high wire. I've never walked the high wire myself, but it's not that the person finds the balance and then just walks across. It's a constant adjustment, as far as I can tell from watching it, a constant rebalancing on a very subtle level. Well, that's how we have to engage with right effort in our practice.

The Buddha gave a very simple example to one of the monks who was over-efforting. He used the example of tuning the strings of a lute—it could be any musical instrument. Obviously, if the strings are too tight, it doesn't work; it doesn't produce a beautiful sound. And if the strings are too loose, it's the same situation. But the strings constantly need tuning. It's adjusting, a continual adjusting to find the balance in any particular situation.

So we need to learn how to check in with our practice and just see: are we getting too tight? Are we efforting? That over-efforting is a kind of struggle. So that means we need to loosen the strings a little bit; we need to relax, settle back a bit more. On the other hand, you may be sitting or walking and find your mind is all over the place—not at all concentrated, kind of restless. Then the effort may be too lax and we really have to up the effort a little bit, pay attention to this. After a while, this adjustment can become very intuitive, once you play with it and learn about it.

I'll offer a few frameworks that I have found helpful over the years for managing this question of right effort. One little phrase that I used a lot is: relaxed but not casual. Relaxed means that we're settling back. We're not leaning forward into experience. We're not caught up in expectation or wanting or the three papañca. We're relaxed, settled back—but not casual. By casual, I mean half-hearted. It's a meditative mind state which I call "more or less mindful." We're kind of there, but not really, not fully. When you notice that, it means you're too much on the casual side. If you feel like you're getting tight, that means you need to relax more. So again, that could be a little catchphrase you use: relaxed but not casual.

Another element of right effort—or kind of polarity, too tight versus too loose, but in a slightly different frame—has to do with what I call the skillful use of yes and no. By "yes," I mean being open and receptive and accepting of what's happening. We're not caught so much in judgment or aversion or contraction. Discomfort comes—yes, it's okay, let me feel it. Or there's some difficult mind state—yes, let me feel it, let me open

to it. So we're saying yes to experience. But there are also times to say no to experience. I'll relate one example from a retreat I was doing, and again, this goes back quite a while.

but it's very vivid in my mind. I was just caught up in a lot of lustful desires—very seductive fantasies in my mind. And my mind was just getting seduced by them. I tried noting, I tried this and that. I went down the whole list of remedies. Nothing was working. My mind kept getting caught.

So as the final remedy, I just said, "Enough. Joseph, enough. Cut it out."

And it was like an emphatic *no* to this happening in the mind that was not skillful. It was an unwholesome state of mind that I was indulging and couldn't seem to extricate myself from. Sometimes, just as with a kid who's doing something harmful and you say, "Don't do that, don't do that," and finally, "*No*, don't do that"—sometimes we need the strength of that no.

But one cautionary note: as you play with yes and no, particularly with the no, it can be very skillful, but it needs to be done without aversion. That's an important point to watch. You could almost do it with a sense of humor, where you see that the mind is just getting lost in this unwholesome pattern, you try all these different remedies, and finally—no. But it's possible to smile at the antics of one's own mind.

I recommend that because what I found is that a sense of humor is a huge ally in this whole meditative path. As one meditator once said in an interview—they came in reporting their experience, and their big insight was: the mind has no pride. Meaning it'll do anything. It'll create all kinds of things. Some are beautiful and wholesome, but some are like these endless, useless fantasies that were going on in my mind.

So it's helpful just to be able to smile at one's own mind and still take the appropriate action in response to what's happening, so that we're cultivating the wholesome and, one way or another, letting go of the unwholesome.

---

A question came in: Does thinking about and doing things for the benefit of one's future self, at the expense of being in the present moment, qualify as a form of conceit? There were some other questions similar to this about how we plan for things without it being caught in the conceit "I am" in the future.

It's really quite simple. It's noticing the difference. For example, if planning is arising in the mind—either in meditation or just in the course of your day when planning is needed—notice the difference between a plan coming up and the mind being *lost* in that whole future scenario. It's as if we're living in a mind-created world of the future. If we're lost in that world, if we're not aware as we're in it and in the planning mode, then very likely the "I am" is being strengthened.

However, the planning can be done and we can be mindful of it as being thoughts in the present moment. Even though the content is about the future, the thought itself is happening now. So if we stay mindful—planning, thinking, whatever note you give it—then you're not lost in the scene, you're not lost in the scenario, but you're still planning if it's needed. You can still use that function of mind, but you stay grounded in the understanding that yes, this planning is happening now. It's not that I'm living in the future. I hope you see that difference. And it's very helpful.

One thing you might keep an eye out for, which is a very common tendency that is not that helpful, is obsessive planning—where we go over the same thing again and again and again, out of either some anxiety or fear or whatever the cause is behind it. When you're planning out your move for the fifteenth time, you might ask yourself: Is this helpful? Is this useful? And probably by the fifteenth time, it's not. So pay attention to that aspect in planning as well, because it is a fairly common tendency. The mind can get a little obsessive about the planning, and then we are caught up. It's as if we're living in the future with the anxiety about it, and that's just causing this run of thoughts.

Generally, with planning thoughts or with other kinds of thoughts too, that question —*is this helpful?*—can be a very effective way of really paying attention. Is it helpful or not? And if we see that it's not helpful, it becomes much easier to let it go because we are being conscious and mindful about it. If we don't ask that question, very often we're just caught up in a whole run of unhelpful thoughts, which doesn't help anything.

So again, I hope you see that whatever our mind is doing—whether in a skillful way or an unskillful way—we can learn from it.

And that's where, as I think I mentioned yesterday, the importance of interest comes in. If we take interest in what our minds are doing and then investigate—and this is the great role of mindfulness and wisdom—we investigate and see: Is this furthering the wholesome in some way or not? Am I just getting caught up in something that's unskillful, an unskillful pattern of mind?

So we can see this. It's not with judgment. It's really just taking an interest in our own mind and seeing what creates more suffering for ourselves and what leads to more peace. Because as I think you all know by now, it's not simply a question of believing what somebody else is saying. We have to see it for ourselves. And that's the beauty of this practice. It's providing us the tools, the technology for this investigation of our own hearts and minds. Because it's only when we see these things for ourselves that the transformation happens.

Okay, so this is a fairly simple question: What is your feeling about whether it's skillful to write synthesized notes while on retreat? The comment before that was that often, in hearing dharma talks or even in the meditation session, there might be some insights, some understandings that we want to remember. And so there's the impulse to make a note or write it down. And that's fine to do. I wouldn't interrupt the sitting for it, but you could make a mental note or remember this, and then at the end of the sitting write it down. There's nothing wrong with that, and it could be helpful.

Over time, then you can see whether, having done this for some period of time, you ever go back and look at them or not. Because I have a drawer full of notebooks of all my brilliant insights. And they've been in the drawer for years and I haven't opened them. But there are times when it can be helpful.

And there was another question—I don't know exactly where it is in this list, but I remember the question: Is there a time when we can actually use the thought process just to explore and investigate some dharma point that we find interesting? And is there a way of thinking in that way, skillfully?

So there is. And it can be very useful and very creative dharmically. It's as if we devote either a particular meditation session or part of a session where we seed the session with a particular thought or idea that we want to explore a little bit, and then allow for reflection. So we're not just cutting them off as being thoughts, but we're actually allowing the mind to creatively explore whatever that dharma point is. And I've had some very interesting understandings come about through that.

I think you'll notice if you do that, that actually generally we stay pretty mindful in that thought process, because it's not just random thoughts passing through and we get carried away by them. This is a more conscious act of reflection. And I found that because of that, there's a fair amount of mindfulness as it's happening. So you might well play with it if this is of interest.

I'll just give you one example, which I think I referred to the other day. Again, this goes back a few years. But I was just reflecting about the second and third noble truths—craving is the cause of suffering, the end of craving is the end of suffering. And as I mentioned, for a long time I thought this is a far-off goal. But then at some point I realized, no, we can actually practice this in each moment. And we can kind of come to the end of craving, even if it's just for a few moments, but we get a taste of that freedom.

And so my mind was just kind of excited by this, because it brought the practice, the depth of the practice, right back into the moment. It wasn't postponing it for some future big enlightenment. And I remember my mind really was reflecting on that, and it was very beneficial. I learned a lot from doing that.

One guideline for it, though: because it can get to be a little too much, or we can start over-reflecting, we want to pay attention to that. I don't know how many of you have had the experience of chewing sugar cane, but especially in tropical countries, you just buy a chunk of sugar cane and chew—it's very juicy and very sweet. So you put it in your mouth, you chew, and you get the really delicious sweet liquid. But quite quickly it becomes dry pulp, and then you just kind of spit it out.

Well, our thoughts, these kinds of reflection thoughts, they're juicy for a while. But once you find the mind just going over and over, repeating the same insight again and again and again—that's the dry pulp stage. So then you realize, okay, enough. Let me come back in a more focused way.

So you can play with it, but play with it skillfully.

This next question is, I think, an important one, and it can be challenging. "Could you please speak about the emotion of shame? I noticed that I'm stuck in this emotion for many years. It's a very painful emotion, letting me believe that I am unworthy of love and belonging."

How do we deal with an emotion like that, one that is really deeply conditioned within us for whatever reason? I want to share a story about an analogous mind state. It wasn't shame itself, but something related. What I learned from that experience, I want to offer as a suggestion for you to see whether you could apply this to shame as well, because I think it could be very effective.

At one point—and again, I've been practicing for so long that these stories come from a wide range of how far back—but this was quite a while ago, and it was very impactful. What I learned from it has stuck with me all these years. I was on retreat and I was

just remembering something I had done, and I was feeling tremendous guilt about it. It had been an unskillful act, and so it was coming up very vividly. My mind was just feeling so guilty, with all the thoughts and feelings associated with that guilt.

This went on for quite some time. I felt really caught. And guilt is very self-lacerating—we're cutting ourselves with guilt, or it might be shame. I think there's some analogy here that will serve.

So I was noticing this, and I was really in the suffering of it for quite a while. At a certain point—and I think this is one of the gifts of the practice—when I'm really caught in suffering, it begins to pique my interest. What is going on here that I'm so caught in? Because there's always a reason. It's not just happening gratuitously. There's something my mind is doing which is keeping me stuck in this. And when I looked more carefully at the guilt, when I was very interested in what this was that was causing so much pain in my mind, I saw that guilt is an ego trip. It's really reinforcing the sense of self in a negative way. "I'm so bad because I did this."

The seduction of guilt, and the reason it has so much power—for example, in this situation—is because I actually did do that thing. It was an unskillful act. So it's not like it was made up. I actually did it, but my mind went to guilt because of it. And because I'd actually done it, it kept feeding the guilt. It was just this loop.

But when I saw that guilt was really an ego trip, strengthening the "I" in a negative way, it was amazing. As soon as I saw that, it was like one of those moments—"Mara, I see you." It was almost as if I was personifying the guilt as Mara coming to seduce me into believing it. "Mara, I see you." And the guilt really fell away in that moment.

What replaced it—and this is really an important part—was what I call the feeling of remorse. In the way I'm using that word, in the remorse that I felt, there was acknowledgment of what I had done. It wasn't pretending that I never did it. And there was the understanding: yes, this was unskillful. But unlike guilt, with remorse I was seeing it, taking responsibility for it, learning from it, but also seeing it as part of this selfless flow of change that is our life.

Built into that deep understanding of impermanence is also forgiveness. We can forgive ourselves. We do harmful things out of ignorance. So we see it, we take responsibility for it, and then we let it pass through.

So I would just see if there are any elements of this that would apply to shame. It may be that the feeling of shame is not coming from any particularly unskillful thing we've done. Perhaps it was just some situation that was not unwholesome on our part, but an unfortunate situation of one kind or another that led to that feeling. But still, if

we're caught in the shame, there is that same reinforcement of the "I." And so if we can see that—"Oh, Mara, I see you"—then it might be possible to just drop back into the whole experience and put it in some frame which sees it as part of the flow of changing phenomena. We're not congealing that particular experience into being who we are.

That's the element of Mara and *māna*. It's like we identify with it, creating that self of "Oh, I am this," and then all the attendant feelings about that. So there's really a great possibility here if we see it and understand it in the right way. It's not pretending we're not feeling it, or even trying to block out whatever might have been the cause of it, but we're holding it in a very different way. We're not reinforcing the "I am-ness" of it. We're seeing it more as this non-personal process. "Oh, because of this, this arose. Because of this, this arose." And we just see it as part of the flow of our lives, letting it pass through.

I would really encourage a careful investigation of this, because often—and I think the question mentioned being stuck in this emotion for many years—this is not uncommon. People do get caught up in particular unskillful patterns. But what I love about Dharma practice, when we have this investigative mind, is that there's always a key to unlocking the sufferings. Because the suffering is always how we're relating to experience. The suffering is not the experience itself. The experience may be painful. It may be unpleasant. But just as we can learn to be with painful sensations in the body and it's okay—it doesn't make it pleasant, but it's okay, it's just an unpleasant feeling which is there and then it passes—so it's the same thing with these emotions. The suffering aspect is not inherent in the unpleasantness of it. The suffering aspect comes from how we're relating to it.

The talks of these last few days on *papañca* would be a very good template as a beginning investigation. "Well, am I relating to it in one of these ways? Is it *māna*? Why not?" So there is a way, I think, with this kind of investigation to actually free ourselves even from long-established patterns. I would really encourage you to do that.

---

Could you speak to the technique of naming or noting? Take, for example, the following: I crave some pleasant experience. I then note that this is craving—a saying in the mind, "craving." Is this saying not just more thought? Should I then note my noting?

Well, you can see, I think, clearly that that would lead to an infinite regression. I want to explain a little bit about the function of mental noting. This is a skillful means. It's a tool. The note is not the essence. The essence is the actual being mindful of what's

present. And the noting, for some people—for many people—can be helpful. So you have to see for yourself: is this helpful or not? But it has to be used in the correct way. It's true that noting is just a thought. That is just another thought.

But it is a conscious thought. When we are actually being mindful, in a very active noting, we are being mindful that we are noting. So it's a skillful use of thought in the service of mindfulness. You definitely don't have to note the note. If you would note a craving, or the breath—in, out, rise, fall—that's sufficient.

This may be getting a little technical with respect to what's actually going on in our minds, but perhaps it'll be of interest to you. One of the conditions for mindfulness to arise, or we could say a supportive condition for mindfulness to arise, is another quality of mind called perception. In fact, perception is one of the basic five aggregates. Perception means that quality of recognizing what it is that's present. This is the naming function. We recognize a craving, or we recognize in-breath or out-breath. Perception is that faculty of recognition.

In the teachings, it's said that this quality of perception, when it's in balance with mindfulness, actually serves and strengthens it. If mindfulness is not present, that's when we get lost in the world of concepts. We're living a lot in the world of our perceptions, of how we recognize things and navigate the world through them. If we're not mindful, then very often we're just lost in this world of concepts. But if it's balanced with mindfulness, then the perception or recognition—craving, or in-breath, out-breath—serves like a picture frame around the picture.

What's the purpose of the frame? It's to focus our attention on the picture. The idea is not for us to be looking at the frame. Although we'll be aware of it and take it in, that's not its function. Its function is to focus attention on what's within the frame. Well, that's how the noting can serve mindfulness. That's how perception is a support for mindfulness. We recognize what it is—craving—and then the mindfulness actually helps us enter into the experience of it. Oh, craving is like this. Craving feels like this. We're exploring the actual experience. But having noted it, that sets the frame and helps us engage in that further exploration.

I hope you get some sense of the possibility that's there with the noting technique. For those of you who have been practicing a while, you may have some experience of it and can see for yourselves whether it's helpful or not. For those of you who may not have used it very much, I would suggest just practicing and seeing. Take a sitting or part of a sitting or walking where you just practice, moment after moment, soft. The noting

has to be very soft, like a whisper in the mind. You don't want the note to overshadow the painting, what's being seen. It's just enough, that recognition—oh, there's this, there's this, there's this.

Play with it and see whether it supports your practice. For many people, it becomes a vehicle for really developing stronger concentration and continuity of mindfulness. Because if you're practicing with the noting for some time and then you go through a stretch where you're not noting anymore, that will be a signal to you that you probably got lost in some train of thought. For some people, however, it's not the right tool. They tried it and practiced with it for a while, but it doesn't seem that helpful. So keep in mind, it's only a tool, it's not the essence, but it would be worth exploring to see for yourself whether it's helpful.

This next question is one that I think we can all relate to, because it's just part of our lives. "Compassion to oneself for having cravings as part of being human seems to give me a nudge in the direction of indulging in them. I am not sure what to make of this."

I think we can all recognize that in the course of a day, we have lots of cravings. Lots of different arisings happen. Desire for a cup of tea, or desire to go for a walk. Lots of things, and sometimes bigger things, more impactful things. So desire and craving is going to come up, and if we're paying attention, we'll see that it comes up a lot.

The question then is, particularly as laypeople living in the world, we are living in the realm of sense pleasures. It's all around us—we're just being exposed to lots of things that might trigger desire and craving in the mind. And this is just part of our life in the world.

are somewhat different for lay people and for monastics. Monastics really are on a path of renunciation, which is very powerful—I'll talk about it a little bit more. But as lay people, that may not be the primary aspect that we're practicing.

So these desires or cravings will arise. The question then is, how do we navigate this in a skillful way that's not deleterious to our well-being?

There are a few things we could watch out for. One is to really hold the precepts in mind, because the precepts are like guardrails. With the different cravings that may arise, if they would lead us to an act that breaks one of the precepts, then the precept would say, "Maybe we don't have to do that. This is going too far. This is leading to something quite unskillful with unhelpful karmic results." So the precepts, having them in mind and really exploring what each of them means for you, is very helpful. It helps us navigate the world with integrity and with safety. They're a great protection.

Another aspect worth paying attention to, even when the desire or craving is not leading to breaking a precept, is to see: are they becoming obsessive? Is this just taking over the mind, and we're obsessing about it? Then again, it's becoming too much. It's out of control. It's not just part of our ease for life in the world, enjoying the sense pleasures appropriate to us as lay people. It's really causing suffering in the mind. If we watch out for that, if it's become obsessive, that's a time to really step back and investigate. Okay, what's going on here? Why am I so driven by this?

Even in the enjoyment of ordinary sense pleasures, which are really fine for us as lay people in the world—we do enjoy lots of pleasant things that arise in the course of a day—what I've found helpful, and in a way it's fun (well, it might not sound like fun when I say it), is sometimes just during the course of a day, I'll have some small desire. Let's just say for a cup of tea or a cup of coffee or a piece of cake—something really simple, relatively harmless. But then, really for fun, I'll just periodically say, "No, I don't really need to do that."

So it's like a mini moment of renunciation. The desire is there, the craving is there, the wanting is there, but this would be the skillful, interesting use of the "no." Remember I was talking about yes and no? So instead of saying yes to it, just occasionally, when you're so inspired with a desire that's coming up: "No, I don't need to do that."

What I find is that those moments are actually very important. They're impactful for a couple of reasons. One, it feels like in that moment it's a little victory over Mara. Remember, I described one meaning of Mara as this being who wants to keep us all enmeshed in the world of pleasure. That's his function. It's interesting that in the Buddhist texts he's called "the evil one." Usually in the Western world, we think of that as some kind of hell being. But in the Buddhist understanding, no—it's this being who wants to keep us enmeshed in pleasure. I find that interesting.

So these little moments of renunciation—"No, I don't need to do that"—feel like a momentary victory over Mara. In addition to that, because in that moment we are cultivating renunciation, even though it's not our major path as it might be for a monastic, it's still a tremendously powerful strength in the mind. We have that ability not to be continually seduced by the desires, by the cravings which will come, but we see, "Oh no, there's this place in the mind, there's this strength in the mind, there's this kind of resilience in the mind that could go with it or not go with it." We're developing that muscle of the mind of renunciation.

My experience in those moments is that it's energizing, because there's a kind of feeling of strength that comes from the ability to do that. So I would play with that. And again, not obsessing about it, but just bringing it into the day somewhat. "No, I don't

need to do that." And then go on and see for yourself what it feels like, exploring the difference in your experience of your mind when you do go to fulfill the craving and desire and when you don't.

So all of this is a learning about another possibility for navigating this world that we're living in.

Now, here's a very easy question: Is it permissible to share portions of the recorded replay of the retreat with others? That seems fine to me.

Next question: How to deal with obsessive thoughts that arise because of childhood trauma? This is a really important, deep question, and there are various ways to begin to understand it.

Sometimes, especially on retreat, for people with a traumatic background, their mind and heart open up and actually in a way regress back to the situation, now reliving the trauma. This is a very delicate situation in practice, and it's really helpful to have some guidance with this because you need to deal with it quite skillfully. Basically, it's about taking it slow. Sometimes people have this attitude of "I'm going to get in there and deal with this and finish with it." That's generally not a good idea. It's really about approaching it very slowly—touching a little bit, then backing off—so we learn to integrate it bit by bit.

There are some people who have really worked a lot with trauma and meditation. I want to recommend a book called *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness* by David Treleaven. It's a very skillful book about how to apply meditation to the situation of reliving trauma. We will be sending out in the next day or two some of the books I've mentioned, and this could be a real help in navigating this.

But sometimes the thoughts that are arising are not because we're reliving the trauma, but we're remembering it and it's just producing a lot of obsessive thoughts. That's a different situation because we're not going back into the trauma itself, but we are remembering and thinking a lot about it.

I want to share another experience I had from a retreat many years ago. It's analogous—it was traumatic in its own way. I was on retreat, a two-month retreat, and I did something in an effort to ease some back pain I was having. I did something that made it infinitely worse. It was really terrible—as if my whole body went into shock and froze in this contracted state. It was painful and contracted and frozen. And then my mind just started blaming myself. How could I have done that? Why couldn't I just leave well enough alone? Why did I try to fix something?

The phrase that was so seductive—I don't know whether you'll be able to relate to this or not—but the phrase that kept coming up in my mind was, "How can you have been so stupid?" And then my mind would just be lost, really lost in anguish, in all these judgmental, self-recriminating thoughts, because my body was really in a bad situation. It turns out it lasted for a couple of years, so it was not a small thing. But on retreat, this happened after the first month, so I was still there for another whole month trying to deal with this mind state of anguish and obsessive thinking.

After a while, there was so much suffering—over and above the pain and discomfort in the body, my mind was just in this terrible state of anguish and obsessive thinking. And I realized that I could not give these thoughts any airtime at all. Because if I even let that first sentence go by—"How can I have been so stupid?"—I was gone. That was enough to just take me away for half an hour on this train of thought. The thought was so seductive because I believed it. "How could I have been so stupid?"

So I realized: no thought. I can't give it any airtime. I kept watching just for the arising of the beginning of that thought.

So instead of letting it play out—"How can I have been so stupid?" and then on and on and on—when I saw in my mind just the first few words, "How can I..."—I just took out the sort of wisdom sword. "Okay, no." That's where a very definitive "no" came in.

An image that came to mind was from amusement parks, where you're shooting at balloons to break them and then you get a prize or something. That was the image in my mind. Every time the beginning of that thought came, I'd just knock it out of the sky, knock it out of the mind.

Again, I want to emphasize, this can be done—and I started doing it—with a sense of humor. Because if we do it with aversion, it's just going to be feeding it. So this is really important. We can have that very strong "no"—this is not skillful, I'm not going to let this thought continue at all—but not with aversion. Just coming out of a place of understanding and wisdom.

And it was amazing. When I didn't allow the mind to keep rising, not feeding that whole obsessive thought process, it really diminished, because I just was not allowing it to take over my mind. With this forceful "no," it made a huge difference. The body still was going through its trip, and it took a while, as I said, quite a while for it to heal. But my mind got much, much better. I was much more able to sit back and just relax into what the situation was. So you might apply this.

The time goes really quickly. There's a lot more questions here. One asks: "Can you please explain a bit more how to do the walking meditation from a beginner's perspective?"

I want to address this because the walking practice is so helpful, so valuable. I mentioned the other day that probably more than the sitting, the walking meditation and the mindfulness we develop through it will carry over most into our lives. Because we're practicing being mindful of the body moving, and just in the course of the day, we move a lot. So the walking practice is fantastic.

You can do it in different ways. Basically, it's finding a path where you're walking back and forth, which is really helpful. It could be ten steps, fifteen steps, five steps—it depends on your circumstances—but ten to fifteen to twenty steps would be a good length.

You can practice at different speeds. As you begin, you might be walking at more or less a normal pace, or slightly slower than normal, where you're just aware—as I was talking about yesterday with the elements—just the moving and touching, moving and touching, feeling rather than watching. So it's really simple. Just taking a step and you feel the movement, you feel the touch. Another step, feel the movement, feel the touch. It's really that simple. And you could practice using the noting and see if that helps.

Then as the mind settles into being mindful of that walking—moving and touching—you could begin to slow down a little bit, and maybe begin to break the step up into different parts. So the first thing might be "lifting, placing, lifting, placing." Or even in three parts: lifting the heel, so you're lifting, and then moving forward, and then placing as the foot comes down and touches. So: lift, move, place. Lift, move, place. Feeling it rather than watching it, and staying very relaxed.

The question I talked about yesterday—"What's being known moment after moment?"—you could just hold that in the mind so that as you're noting the lift, move, place, you're actually connecting with the felt experience of that. In the lifting, what are you actually feeling? Moving forward, what are you feeling? In placing, what are you feeling? So that's basically it.

And then of course, the mind will wander. When you notice that, just become aware and come back, take another step. This is worth doing, and I would devote some time to it—not just doing the walking meditation for five minutes, but really giving it time and developing it, because you're developing that habit to be mindful of the body in move-

ment. At a certain point, that becomes so ingrained that it becomes the default. As you're moving about in the world, you'll find yourself naturally being much more mindful of the body and your activities.

Now, there were a few questions about this. Basically: what is doing the knowing? One person wrote, "I think I get pretty out of the picture in knowing or noticing arising experience, but still wondering what is knowing arises. Am I hopelessly lost in dualism?" And there was another question: "If there's no I, me, or mine, if there is no self, then what or who is observing movement, whether there is taste or there is movement?" And another one: "I have a question regarding being known. When I tell myself, for example, chewing is being known, my mind immediately asks, known by whom?"

So you see, these are all related questions. Just a couple of things to say about this. One is that a more helpful question rather than "being known by whom" might be "known by what"—because already if we're using "whom," we're positing a who, a self, an I doing it. And then it gets confusing. Well, who is this mysterious who? Of course it's difficult, because it's not there in the first place. So "who" is not exactly the right question. But we could ask, things are being known—well, known by what?

Different Buddhist traditions have different ways of explaining this, and I just want to mention a few of them. Then you can see what actually fits your experience.

So basically, what is knowing? That knowing is the definition of consciousness. In other words, consciousness in the Buddhist context means that which knows. It's the knowing faculty of mind. We know a sight or know a sound or know a thought—that's the function of consciousness. And consciousness in itself is not I, it's not mine. It's just another non-personal aspect of this mind-body process with its own particular function, which is to know the arising object. So consciousness equals knowing. That's what knows. It's consciousness that knows.

How can we begin to really explore the nature of consciousness? This gets really interesting. In some Buddhist traditions, it's explained that what we call self—this flow of changing phenomena—what's happening is there is a pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. That's what the unfolding is. In each moment, each object has its own moment of consciousness which knows it, and both the knowing and the object are arising and passing away in each moment. This is the flow of life.

In meditation, we usually start with mindfulness of the object because it's more tangible. But as the practice deepens, one of the insights is the recognition that what's happening at every moment is knowing an object. We begin to experience the knowing as-

pect and the object aspect—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. This gives us quite a clear understanding of the experience and the function of consciousness in the moment: that it's a process also arising and passing away in each moment with each new object. So that's one framework for understanding how consciousness functions.

In other Buddhist traditions, there's another interesting approach which reveals another aspect of consciousness. There's a Zen story which highlights this. Sometimes people hear the story as a kind of Zen witticism, and they chuckle at the end. But don't hear it like that. There's actually a profound teaching in it, so don't miss it.

A seeker came to see Bodhidharma, the great master who brought Buddhism from India to China.

This seeker came to Bodhidharma and said, "I'm suffering so much. Please, help pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma replied, "Show me your mind and I'll pacify it."

The seeker said, "I've looked for it everywhere. I've looked for this mind everywhere and I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma said, "There—it's already pacified."

This points to one aspect, one way of approaching our understanding of consciousness or knowing. It's like we look for it, but there's nothing tangible to find. And yet the knowing is happening. We can't find it, but it's still functioning. This is the mystery of consciousness. But in the not-finding—"I've looked everywhere and I can't find it"—something interesting happens in that moment of recognizing the unfindability of it. The mind is already pacified.

I've used this little story and that phrase frequently. If my mind is caught up in some struggle of one kind or another and I'm just in it for whatever reason, and I see that, I'll often use this phrase. Because I'm so familiar with the story, all I have to do is remind myself: "Already pacified." Because I already know what precedes that. It's like, oh, there's nothing to find. And in that nothing to find—already pacified.

Again, these approaches come from different traditions. The descriptions are not the point. The point of all this is what frees the mind from clinging, what frees the mind from attachment, what frees the mind from papañca. I wouldn't get so caught up in which of these is right. They're both right, because they're both skillful means, and we

want to see them as skillful means. Any model is a skillful means for freeing our hearts and minds. So that's the test: which skillful means actually helps you come to that place of greater freedom?

Let me address a few more questions. One asks about the four brahmaviharas, which arise as a result of letting go of the papañcas. "How does one aim to reach these qualities while setting boundaries around people close to you who are mean-spirited?"—and in parentheses, "usually as a result of their own suffering."

This is a very practical question. How do we cultivate these brahmaviharas when we're in difficult situations with people who are really difficult, mean-spirited, doing harmful things?

It is perfectly fine in these situations to set boundaries. Loving-kindness or compassion doesn't mean that we just roll over and let people walk all over us. No. If a boundary is appropriate, we set it. However, can we do it with kindness rather than with anger or aversion?

Ram Dass's guru, Maharaji, had this one teaching: do what you do, but don't throw anyone out of your heart. I really appreciate that, because sometimes we do need to set boundaries or say, "No, this is wrong." We're responding to a difficult situation. But are we doing it without throwing that person out of our hearts? Are we doing it with kindness?

The Dalai Lama had a beautiful teaching. He said, "Practice kindness whenever possible. It's always possible." That's really important to remember. It is always possible, because that's up to us. It has nothing really to do with the other person. It's our capacity. We can practice it and cultivate it. So kindness does have the strength to be there in these very challenging circumstances where we take action, where we respond—but from a place of kindness, from a place of caring, from not throwing them out of our hearts.

One more brief clarification. Someone noted that I said once a being becomes fully awakened, they have no more defilements of thinking—and the question goes on from there. But that was a slight misinterpretation. It's not that all thinking necessarily stops.

It's that defilement stops. There's no greed or hatred or delusion. But the thinking function can still be there. I just wanted to clarify that point.

Another question concerned using the phrase "things being known" in practice, noting that repeating it continuously—sight being known, sound being known, thought being known—makes for a very busy internal monologue. You don't have to do that. Use

that phrase of "things being known" just perhaps right at the beginning, to set the frame for how you're going to be holding experience. It's simply a reminder: "Okay, I'm going to spend the next period of time in this framework, settled back and simply watching for, or being aware of, what's being known moment after moment." It's not that you have to repeat that phrase each time.

So we're coming to the end of the retreat. Roxanne will be leading the closing session this evening with the dedication of merit. I just want to mention that I've really enjoyed being with you all, even though I can't see you. I can't see you with my physical eye, but I feel like I'm seeing you with my mind's eye. As I'm talking into the camera of the iPad, the iPad disappears, really. It's as if we're here together. And so I've really enjoyed this time with you. I hope it has been helpful.

Now I'm going to do something I almost never do, which is to give a little plug for my book, *Mindfulness*. The reason is that this is a substantial book—over four hundred pages—and it comes out of a series of forty-seven talks I gave at the Forest Refuge about the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse on mindfulness. The book goes into quite a lot of detail about many of the questions you asked, so it could be a resource for you if you still have questions or want to further explore some of the topics I responded to. There's a lot in the book about many of the subjects you brought up through your questions. If you're interested and inclined, you might take a look at that.

Thank you very much for being here. Thank you for your presence. I hope it's been valuable for you.

Let's sit just for a minute or two and let everything resolve and settle.

CHAPTER 63

# Papañca 1: Craving, Conceit, and Wrong View

Joseph Goldstein · 1h16

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein introduces papañca, the Pāli term for the proliferating tendencies that construct our experience of suffering. Drawing from the Sabba Sutta (The All), he establishes that our entire lived experience consists of just six sense bases and their objects—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. The crucial question becomes not who we are, but what we are and how we relate to these basic building blocks of experience.*
>
> *Goldstein systematically unpacks the three aspects of papañca: craving (rooted in 'this is mine'), conceit or māna (the felt sense of 'I am'), and wrong view (the belief in an enduring self). Through personal anecdotes—from sweatshirt fantasies during deep practice to self-judgment on retreat—he demonstrates how these tendencies operate in ordinary life. He highlights the comparing mind as a common manifestation of conceit and explains how naming these defilements can free us from their grip, referencing the Bāhiya Sutta's teaching: 'In the seen, let there be just what is seen.'*
>
> *The practical implications are clear: when we recognize these proliferating tendencies as impersonal processes rather than identifying with their content, liberation becomes possible. Goldstein encourages practitioners to investigate the stress hidden within craving, notice the relief when desire passes, and observe how self-judgment is simply māna at work. This teaching sets the foundation for understanding how we construct suffering—with the remedy to follow in subsequent talks.*

I'd like to begin this session with a 15-minute sitting. It's a way of settling in and settling back.

Take a comfortable meditative posture and just quickly review some of the instructions that I gave a little bit earlier. Settling into the awareness of your body posture. There is a body. Sometimes by holding that bigger frame—there is a body—even when we become aware of the body breathing, we don't necessarily have to narrow our focus, although we could. It's possible to be with the breath within the context of that larger frame, the whole body.

What I've found, and many people have said it's been helpful for them, is that by being aware of the breath within the larger frame, it makes it easier to allow for the breath to settle into its own rhythm. There seems to be less tendency to control. So you

can experiment a little bit as you settle into the awareness of the body—whether you keep that sense that there is a body and then simply become aware of the body breathing within that larger frame, or whether you narrow the focus on the feeling of the sensations of the breath. See which is more helpful to you at any particular time. If you feel that you are controlling or manipulating the breath in some way, that would be a particularly good time to enlarge the context, enlarge the frame.

Settling in, closing the eyes gently and softly. Relaxing the eyes, relaxing the jaw, the shoulders, the heart, the belly. There is a body. Sit and know you're sitting. Become mindful of the sensations of the body breathing. Letting the breath be natural, finding its own rhythm. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

When you notice the mind begins to wander, getting caught up in thoughts, simply acknowledge that as thinking. Come back and reconnect with the feeling of the whole body sitting, with the sensations of the body breathing. If you become aware of a space between the out-breath and the next in-breath, that's a good place to rest in the awareness of the whole body. Sitting, sitting until the next breath comes by itself.

There is a body. As the body breathes in, know it's breathing in. As the body breathes out, know it's breathing out.

When you're ready, you can slowly open your eyes, reconnect with the world around you.

One of the challenges we face as lay practitioners living in the world is how we can integrate the Buddhist teachings of liberation, the Buddhist teachings on enlightenment, into the busyness of our lives. In the talks I'm going to be giving during this retreat, I want to do something a little different. I want to dive into the deep end of things. Some of these teachings may be familiar to some of you, and perhaps some won't be. At first it may seem a little philosophical or conceptual or intellectual, but if you hang in there through the talks and through the question sessions, you'll see that these teachings have a tremendously practical application and implication in our lives. They are really the key to understanding how we create suffering for ourselves and others, and how we can be free.

Our inquiries often begin either as a conscious reflection or perhaps as a more underlying background motivation—wondering and investigating the question, who am I? When I think back to my very early introduction to the practice, I was still in the Peace Corps in Thailand. This was in 1965, '66. I was young, 21 or 22 years old, going through all the angst of being that age and trying to figure things out for myself. I remember one

time I was teaching English in Bangkok. I was in my room just looking at the mirror, looking at myself, and this question arose—who is behind what I'm seeing? Who am I behind all the turmoil of the thoughts and emotions? The question was very alive: who am I?

But this "who" can be a very misleading question, because it is already predicated on a misconception. If we ask, who am I, we are already positing a belief in some self at the center of it all. At the center of this conventional world, we are positing this mysterious being at the center of things.

Of course, it's important to say that in ordinary ways of communication, this question of the "who" is completely appropriate. If we ask who's coming for dinner, we don't want a particularly long philosophical analysis of what we mean by "who." But from a Dharma perspective, when not rightly understood, this imaginary "who," this view of the self, is the source of much of the suffering in our lives.

So just a little teaching about this. There was a writer by the name of Wei Wu Wei. He was actually a Westerner, I think, who was living in Hong Kong. He clearly had some awakening experience, and he wrote many books under this name, Wei Wu Wei. The books contain a lot of short little aphorisms expressing his understanding. One of these aphorisms was: "Being attached to the view of self is like a dog barking up a tree that isn't there." So the question is, how long are we going to keep on barking?

In terms of understanding and investigating the nature of suffering and the nature of freedom in a deeper way, a more fruitful question than "who" is "what." What are the basic building blocks of our experience? And then what do we do with them? How do we relate to these building blocks of experience? And again, just as a side note, even though during these talks I'm going to be using the pronouns of I and you and me and we and they, keep in mind that the use of these pronouns is just a convenient way of communication, not that it reflects some essential "who" behind it all.

Okay, so what is the "what"? What am I? What is the "what"? The Buddha laid out some very simple ways of understanding these basic elements of all of our experience. And then he talked about how we relate to these building blocks. This, of course, involves a little bit more complexity. How do we relate to the basic building blocks of experience that then go on to construct our lived reality?

There's one short discourse that the Buddha gave which is so simple and so radically profound. The name of the discourse is called "The All." In it, the Buddha describes in six short phrases the all, the totality of our experience. So what is the all? The eye and

visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and taste, the body and tactile sensations, and the mind and mental objects—thoughts and emotions and images. These are basically the six sense spaces and their respective objects.

This is not hard to understand or relate to. So far, so good. Moment after moment, what we're experiencing are either moments of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking and feeling. In a way, we could think of ourselves and our lives as a six-piece chamber orchestra playing the music of our lives, because it's only these six things that are ever happening. I find this particularly interesting to reflect on when I, or we, may be caught up in the complexity and confusion of our lives—just to reflect for a moment. It's only six things that are happening: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, and feeling. This is what's going on.

But this is the foundation of understanding. Here's where it starts to get interesting. Because how we're relating to these six basic building blocks, how we relate to them, becomes also part of the unfolding of our lives. And it either creates more stress and suffering for us, or more peace and happiness. So what do we construct out of these fundamental elements, these fundamental building blocks of experience? What do we construct out of them? And how does it all happen?

Here we're getting into the meat of the talk. The Buddha spoke of three powerful tendencies in the mind. In the Pali language—the language of ancient India in which the teachings have been preserved—these proliferating tendencies are called papañca. They build our experience of the world, these papañca, these proliferating tendencies. They build our experience of the world based on the mistaken view of self. So these very deeply rooted tendencies in the mind are constructing our lived experience based on a mistaken idea. And that's the cause of, again in the Pali language, what is called dukkha—the suffering, the confusion, the unsatisfactory nature of our lives.

So we want to explore exactly how all this is happening. These forces, these proliferating tendencies—and they're deeply conditioned within us, deeply habituated—these three forces are the tendencies of craving, of conceit, and of wrong view. I'm going to talk about each of these in some more detail and how they operate in our lives. Craving is something that I think most of us are easily familiar with. It's wanting, or desire, or thirst for something.

What's interesting is that craving is rooted in the sense of things being mine or belonging to me. We want things so that they can belong to me, so that they become mine. And that's what we crave.

I'll give you a very simple example of this kind of craving based on "mine" or "belonging to me." This is something that happened years ago on a retreat. I was at the Forest Refuge here at IMS doing my own retreat, and we all probably have established certain routines when we go on retreat. One of my things is that I have a favorite retreat sweatshirt—it's really comfy. So every retreat I'm on, I wear this sweatshirt.

I was doing walking meditation, and I felt like I was quite deep in my practice. As I was walking, I was reflecting on the Four Noble Truths and how craving is the cause of suffering, which is the second noble truth. And I thought to myself, "Joseph, well, if craving is the source of suffering, just stop craving. Just stop it." So that was my thought and my intention and my reflection.

And then in the very next moment, I started thinking about my favorite sweatshirt. I thought, "Oh, it would be nice to have it in a lot of different colors." And my mind went on this whole fantasy of getting the sweatshirt in different colors. So you see how craving is deeply habituated—even in the midst of sometimes what seems like deep practice and being on retreat, still it manifests. Craving based on the sense of mine, or having something belong to me.

That's the first of the proliferating tendencies, the papañca. And you can get the sense of what's meant by proliferating: I went from just enjoying my sweatshirt to all of a sudden wanting one in six different colors, and the mind just proliferates in that way.

The second of the proliferating tendencies is conceit. This is the English translation of the Pali word *māna*. It means something a little different than the usual English meaning of the word conceit, which usually suggests somebody being very puffed up, thinking very well of themselves. Here, in the Buddhist sense, *māna* or conceit in its most fundamental meaning is that felt sense of "I am." It's like, "I am this." Which is very pervasive—we go through the day very much immersed in this feeling. It was expressed in an ad I once saw in the New York Times for a t-shirt, and on the t-shirt was emblazoned "Me, me, me." This would be an expression of conceit.

So there's craving, one of the proliferating tendencies, and conceit, this deeply felt sense of "I am." And then the third proliferating tendency is called wrong view. In the Buddhist teachings, wrong view refers to the deeply held belief that there is a self—some unchanging, enduring being at the center of it all. That being to whom everything is happening.

So: craving, conceit, and wrong view. Just as a reminder, conceit is more the felt sense of "I am," and wrong view is the belief that there is a self at the center of it all. In the teachings, these three tendencies are usually expressed as "this is mine," which is

based on craving; "this I am," which is based in conceit; and "this is myself," which is based in wrong view. "This is mine, this I am, this is myself"—these are the three expressions of papañca.

It would be helpful in understanding the practical application of all this to distinguish these tendencies one from the other and to begin to get some sense of how they are functioning or manifesting in our lives. Because these are the different ways we construct and strengthen the sense of self in our lives. And the clearer we are about them, the easier it is to see and disentangle from them.

To give you a sense of how important this is on our path of practice and liberation, I want to read a short teaching from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the great Tibetan meditation masters of the last century. This is what he said:

"The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in samsara, in this round of existence, for countless past lifetimes. It is this very thing now—the idea of an enduring sense of self—that prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free, and to free others too."

I hope you get a sense of just how crucial it is to unpack this notion of self and the different ways it manifests through the papañca, through the proliferating tendencies, in our aspiration to be free—to both free ourselves and to help free others.

We can see how each of these three tendencies works and how they differentiate themselves in some very ordinary experiences in our lives. I hope examining these will help clarify the meaning of each tendency.

For example, how do we relate to the body? Right here, we can begin to see the difference between craving—"this is mine"—and conceit—"this I am." In considering the body, we probably wouldn't say "I am the leg" or "the leg is me." But we would commonly refer to it as "my leg," as if it belongs to this imaginary me. The leg is mine; the leg belongs to me. And so that entails whatever craving or desires we have about the leg being this way or that way.

As we extend this to how we relate to the whole body, it gets a little interesting because at first it's possible we might think or say, "Well, I am the body." But certainly as we age, we have a very different experience of it. It's quite common as we get older to feel that who we are, the sense of "I am," hasn't really changed at all, even as we see the gray hairs and the wrinkles. Internally, we may feel we are the same person, the same "me" that we were twenty or thirty years ago. And so when we see the body age so visibly and even feel the effects of aging, we might often wonder, "How did this happen?"

It seems so strange because internally, we may not feel that we've aged at all. So again, it's more likely to see the body with this perspective as belonging to me, rather than it being who I am.

Particularly with the sense of the body being mine, the body belonging to me, it's so clear how many desires and cravings arise from that sense—"my body" and all the craving and desire that arises—wanting the body to be and to look a certain way. Probably a good part of our lives revolves around thinking about and trying to satisfy these cravings.

Just as an extreme expression of this, I once saw an ad in some magazine featuring a beautiful person, and the caption was, "I don't let anything stand in the way of my pleasure." As if the fulfillment of all our wants and cravings is the main purpose of our lives. It would be interesting just to notice and reflect on how central this motivation is in our own lives, even if it is expressed a little more subtly. How much of our lives do we spend trying to fulfill the desires and cravings related to "my body"?

Here there's another really interesting discernment that we can begin to investigate in our lives, because it actually can save us a lot of stress. Unexamined, we often equate pleasure with desire. In another caption I once saw, it said, "Increase your desire"—as if that will actually bring us more pleasure. If we haven't really investigated, we think and equate desire with pleasure, and we don't see the stress involved in the wanting, in the craving, in the desire.

So just as an experiment where you can check this out for yourself—and as with all the teachings, I think this is important to say: there's no suggestion that you should hear this and just necessarily believe it all. It's all an invitation to investigate for yourself, to explore, and to use these suggestions to help in that investigation.

One exercise in meditation would be really interesting. When you're sitting and some desire arises, and you may be caught up in it—maybe it's desire for food, or a sexual fantasy, or your next vacation, whatever it may be—there's some desire arising in the mind and you're caught up in it. Then at a certain point, the desire will pass, because everything does pass; everything changes. Just notice what it feels like in that moment when the desire passes. We're caught up, we're lost in fantasy, desiring, wanting, and then at a certain point the desire goes. Right in that moment, pay attention to what it feels like as the desire passes away.

My own experience has always been that in that moment of the desire passing, it feels like a tremendous sense of relief. It feels like the mind, the heart, has just been let out of the grip of something—and there's such ease in that letting go. Right there, we can begin to see the stress involved when we're caught up in wanting and craving, and the ease and peace when the mind is free of that.

So we can see this a lot with reference to craving associated with the sense of the body being mine, the body belonging to me. We also claim ownership—"it's mine"—with much of our inner world: my anger, my thoughts, my happiness, all of this belonging to me.

This sense of ownership, this beginning to solidify our sense of self through desire and craving and "me" and "mine," starts really young. This sense of possessiveness starts really early in our lives. Just imagine a group of kids playing with some toys on the playground. Maybe parents are urging their children to share their toys and coming up against perhaps an occasional heartfelt wail: "But it's mine!" The child is claiming that ownership, resisting the urge to share.

So you can see, this is not a superficial conditioning. This goes very deep in the way our hearts and minds have been programmed.

The Buddha also spoke of more subtle kinds of craving, and this has particular application in our meditation practice itself. The Buddha called this kind of craving "craving for becoming." When we believe this mind and body to be mine, that they belong to me, then all kinds of cravings arise—we want to become, we want them to become this or that. And so craving for becoming is very much involved in this process.

One aspect of this, which we're all familiar with in our meditation practice and in other aspects of our lives as well, is that wanting energy of expectation. Just think of times in your practice when things are not flowing along smoothly, when it feels like we're struggling to meditate. Usually we see struggle as a problem, but actually the feeling of struggle, the sense of struggle, is really not a problem. It's actually tremendously helpful feedback. Because what struggle means is that something is going on that we're not accepting. If we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

It might be discomfort in the body. It might be a restless mind. It might be a lot of disturbing sounds. A difficult emotion. Something is going on that we're not open to. And when we're not open to it, then it becomes fuel for the craving and expectation of wanting it to be different. So we want to take this time of expectation, really investigate the

struggle that may be fueling it, and see that the feeling of struggle is actually good feedback—reminding us, "Okay, what am I not accepting? Can I open to that?" And then seeing how the non-acceptance is just fueling all kinds of expectations.

These can all come down to one really deeply rooted tendency, a conditioning that is pretty universal. In one way it gets to the very heart of our practice: namely, because of the sense of the mind-body being mine, we want what's pleasant and we don't want what's unpleasant. This is how most people live. And they would also feel, well, this is quite natural. Of course we want what's pleasant and want to avoid what's unpleasant.

But for those on the path, really investigating, trying to explore in a deeper way what the causes of suffering are in our lives and what the possibility really is for peace and ease and freedom—we want to bring our mindfulness, our awareness, to see that in a very fundamental way, there's more distress in wanting to get rid of unpleasantness than in simply feeling the unpleasantness itself.

For those of you who are somewhat experienced in practice, you may well have had the experience over time of gradually developing that equanimity where we're open to what's pleasant and we feel that, we're open to what's unpleasant and we're okay with that, without reactivity in the mind. We begin to experience for ourselves—this is no longer theoretical or some conceptual teaching—we really begin to experience for ourselves the ease of that non-reactivity, the ease of non-craving, the ease of coming out of or disentangling from this particular proliferating tendency.

Now, this doesn't mean that we don't respond to what we're experiencing. It's not like we just think, "Oh, whatever," and we're not engaged with the world. That's not what I'm suggesting at all. The question is, can our response and our engagement come from a place of wisdom rather than the conditioned reaction of craving? Rather than just, "I want what's pleasant, I don't want what's unpleasant," caught up in that reactivity—can we respond to the situations around us with greater wisdom?

Because obviously we need to take care of our bodies and we need to take care of our minds and we need to take care of the environment, both physical and social. There are definitely times when it's important to set boundaries, or when we're simply satisfying basic needs. All of this is both necessary and appropriate. We don't want to be using dharma terminology for what has been called spiritual bypass. "Oh, there's no one here, so nothing matters." Or, "Everything's empty, so making wise choices is not important." That's an incorrect understanding of all this.

When we read the Buddhist discourses, we see that the Buddha was often quite fierce in highlighting what's right and what's wrong, what's skillful and unskillful, what's wholesome and unwholesome. So we want to have that discernment—but can we be responsive rather than reactive? Acting from a place of discernment and wisdom rather than the conditioned reactivity of craving.

So I've talked quite a lot now about the first aspect of papañca, which is craving, born from the notion "this is mine, this belongs to me"—whether it's the body belonging to me, our thoughts and emotions belonging to a me, or external things belonging to a me. This is the proliferating tendency of craving. And I think it's not hard to see how this force of craving just builds our world and the world that we inhabit.

The workings of the second aspect of papañca, conceit, are a little more subtle and in some ways more pervasive.

Although the conceit, again, remember, it means that sense of "I am, I am this." Usually in the Buddhist meaning of conceit, "I am" refers to the comparing mind—when we compare oneself with others as being either better than, equal to, or worse than someone else.

But conceit also manifests as thoughts of "I am" over time. For example, any thoughts of "I was this in the past, I am this now, I will be in the future." You can see that these thoughts, which are very common in our lives—memories and plans, reflections on the present—if we're not careful in our mindfulness and awareness, they just reinforce this sense of "I am."

Generally, this papañca of conceit is so deeply rooted and so pervasive that it's really the backdrop of how we interpret our experience in the world. It's just so common that we don't even pay attention to it. Just as an example, we go through the day: "I'm walking, I'm eating, I'm doing this, I'm doing that." Unthinkingly, we're not even paying attention to it. Yet just in that way of understanding and expressing things, we are again reinforcing the notion that there is this mysterious "I" behind it all, to whom experience is happening.

What's so striking to me is that it is so ordinary. We don't usually take the time to investigate what is the "I" that we're talking about.

I'd like to give two examples of this. The first shows the proliferating tendency of "I am." The second really highlights the suffering aspect and the potential for freedom when we understand it.

This past winter, I was on a self-retreat at home here in Barre. As most of you probably know, New England winters can be really cold. I was doing walking meditation outside and it was freezing—a burning icy wind, and my face was burning. It was really unpleasant. The way I started thinking about it, quite subliminally, was: "Oh, I'm really cold. I'm really cold. This is painful." Of course, that would be a conventional and convenient way to express what was going on. But there was really something deeper happening.

Instead of the simple awareness—"there's cold" or "there is unpleasantness," noting the unpleasant feeling of it—the "I am-ness," "I'm so cold," quickly morphed into several minutes of Hawaii fantasies. "If only I could be walking, doing my walking meditation on the beach in Hawaii..." I spent a couple of minutes indulging in that fantasy. But it was all arising out of that proliferation of the tendency, the conceit, "I am." "I'm so cold. If only I were in Hawaii, things would be so much more agreeable."

You can see how deeply embedded this particular tendency of "I am" is in our lives. It's just the ordinary way we view our experience. But it's not the most liberating way of viewing our experience. In fact, it entangles us in all kinds of suffering.

The other example, perhaps even more impactful than a few minutes of Hawaii fantasy, is how the conceit—this papañca of conceit, "I am"—has to do with self-judgment and self-criticism. In teaching for so many years now, over fifty years, and hearing so many meditators come in and describe their experience, it's striking. I see in my own experience in life just how striking the depth of this conditioning is—the pattern of self-judgment. It's a lot of suffering for us.

I had a revealing experience of this on my last retreat, which reinforced something I had observed before, but it really stood out. It was highlighted in this one particular example. I was on retreat doing quite intensive practice. Then one day—I don't even remember the exact details—I just frittered away some time. I spent an hour or so doing something, I don't even remember what, but it wasn't meditating, and it wasn't even being particularly aware.

At a certain point, I became aware of this and I saw my mind become quite self-judgmental. "Oh, you wasted all this time, such a terrible yogi," going on and on. I wasn't feeling good. It really created a down mood in myself, this self-judgment and self-criticism.

But then something very interesting happened. It was really quite amazing. As soon as I could see all of these self-critical, self-judgmental thoughts as a manifestation of māna, of conceit, of "I am"—

There was a lot of I am-ness in a negative way. So it was the working of conceit, of papañca. And the proliferating aspect was so clear because it created a whole self-story around that particular self-judgment, with a strong sense of I am-ness running through it.

But what was so amazing—and this is really what I'd like to encourage you to investigate for yourself—as soon as I could name the defilement, as soon as I could identify that particular tendency as māna, as conceit, the whole thing simply fell away. I settled back into the present moment and continued with my practice.

I find it helpful to use the Pali word because, in a way, it highlights the impersonality of that tendency. The māna itself is not self. It's just this particular tendency in the mind of "I am-ing." As soon as I could name it—"Oh, that's just māna"—and see it in that way, I was no longer caught in the story. I was back in a place of ease.

The important point here, and it has quite a general application that can be so helpful and freeing: when we're in some state of suffering or discontent, if we can see the particular defilement in the mind that's causing the suffering—whether it's conceit, craving, aversion, whatever unwholesome tendency—if we can actually name that particular mind state and see it clearly, it extricates us from identification with the whole story. It frees us from that web of proliferation because we're seeing the root cause underneath the proliferation. "This is just māna, that's all it is." And in that moment, we're no longer caught.

This is often represented in the Buddhist texts through the figure of Māra—not māna, but Māra, who is the embodiment of ignorance. Māra often manifests as some being coming to test the Buddha or the great disciples with some temptation or another. And they will say, "Māra, I see you." In the moment of saying this, Māra disappears.

We can apply that very same energy to our own experience of difficulty or suffering. If we can connect with the particular mind state that's causing the suffering, that's what takes us out of the story—the proliferation of I am.

It's so interesting: when we focus on the content and the story that arises in these situations, it's incredibly seductive because we're the star of the show. There's a sense of I, and it could be a farce or it could be a tragedy, but that's what makes it seductive. Yet really what's happening is that we're just proliferating the I am into existence.

When we can see this clearly, we come back to what I mentioned at the very beginning of the talk—we reconnect with the basic building blocks of experience, those six basic building blocks. This was expressed in one very powerful discourse the Buddha gave called the Discourse to Bāhiya.

There's a whole background story, but to abbreviate: this man Bāhiya came to see the Buddha. He had traveled a long distance, very much on fire with wanting to be free. He met the Buddha while the Buddha was out on alms round and asked for the teachings. The Buddha said, "Please wait, come back to the monastery, I'll be glad to teach you." But Bāhiya was insistent. He said, "No, please teach me now. You may die, I may die. Teach me now."

So there's the Buddha in the middle of the street with his bowl, needing to express the most liberating of teachings in just a few short phrases.

He said: "Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus. In the seen, let there be just what is seen. In the heard, let there be just what is heard. In the sensed—that is smell, taste, and touch—let there be just what is sensed. And in the thought, let there be just what is thought."

In that way, the mind becomes free. We are not caught up in papañca, in the proliferating tendencies around these basic elements of our experience. In seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind objects—let there be just what there is. This opens up the gateway to ever-deepening Dharma understanding.

Of course, as my first teacher Munindraji would often say, "It's simple, but it's not easy." These proliferating tendencies of craving, conceit, and wrong view are so deeply habituated within us. They ensnare us again and again in these constructed worlds of I, me, and mine. So we need to see how they're operating.

We need to explore and investigate what we might call the mechanics of our lives—how we're creating our worlds and creating our experience. As the famous Indian poet, philosopher, and author Tagore said, "It's very simple to be happy, but it's very difficult to be simple." I think that's very reflective of our path. It's not complicated. It's very simple—simple, but not easy.

One of the most common manifestations of conceit, which I mentioned earlier, is the comparing mind, where we evaluate ourselves in relationship to some other person or to some idealized presentation of someone. A good part of our consumer society runs on this mental stage. We see some ad showing a totally perfect being enjoying some product, and the suggestion is that if only we had that object, we would enjoy the same happiness as this perfect being who is obviously enjoying it. Of course, on a rational level, we know this is ridiculous, and yet it works on us. How much of our society is based on that kind of consumer craving—thinking that comparing ourselves to somebody who has these things will also make us happy?

I think most of us have at least made some beginning in seeing through this, but it would be worth paying attention to because it's pretty deep and often subliminal. Perhaps on a more subtle level, and a more deeply impactful level, it would be very illuminating to watch our minds as we meet or interact with different people. How many quick little comparing judgments are we making? It could be about appearance, personality, intelligence, skills—almost anything. It could even be about how mindful one is being, comparing ourselves with others. There's this strong tendency to evaluate ourselves based on these comparisons, and we feel either less than, equal to, or more than, with all of the attendant emotions.

But all of this falls away as soon as we recognize this comparing mind. "Oh, this is just *māna*. This is just the conceit 'I am,' the comparing mind." We see it, and it no longer has a hold on us.

So we've talked about craving, and we've talked about conceit. The last of the proliferating tendencies the Buddha called wrong view. As I mentioned, this is the deeply conditioned belief that there is a self—meaning some core, unchanging, underlying being that is the "who" of "who am I?" We don't quite know what it is, and yet we still believe it to be at the center of our existence. While conceit is the self-sense "I am," wrong view is this deeply embedded belief. And this belief conditions a good part of how we move in the world.

The Buddha was very strong in his teaching about wrong view. He said he sees nothing more harmful, no mental state more harmful, than wrong view—because everything stemming from this belief in self leads us in the wrong direction. It leads us in the direction of more suffering, more stress, more unease.

This has been a lot. Hopefully you've gotten some sense of how these three aspects of *papañca* work. *Papañca* again means the proliferating tendencies of mind. It's not just that they're unskillful in themselves—they have the power to proliferate. Somebody once called them the imperialistic qualities of the mind; they try to take everything over. So hopefully you've gotten some sense of how these three different aspects are manifesting and working in our lives: "this is mine," "this I am," "this is myself."

One big question remains: given the great conditioning power of *papañca*, these proliferating tendencies that construct and reconstruct our lived experience out of the simple building blocks of our experience, what is the remedy? How do we free ourselves? That will be the topic of the next talk.

Just a couple of words here. First, take a moment—maybe take a few deep breaths—to let all this settle.

I realized, as I mentioned, that I'm diving into the deep end of things—getting to the heart of what causes suffering in our lives. And then we'll be talking about the possibility of freedom.

Tomorrow's session will be a question and response period, so on the unlikely chance that you have some questions about all this, please email them through the link on the retreat website.

Before ending, the next session in the schedule is a walking period. There will be more detailed instructions on walking practice, but I thought I would describe it in the most simple way for those who are new, so you can begin to explore walking meditation. I can't emphasize enough how hugely helpful it is.

Sometimes people think of walking as a kind of second-tier meditation—the real meditation is sitting, and then walking, and then, oh yes, be mindful of everything else. Sometimes I like to suggest that people actually reverse that order and give most importance to being mindful of daily activities, then the walking, then the sitting, just to counter our perhaps usual way of thinking about it. I've experienced so many insights in walking practice. I would like to really encourage you to spend some time developing it.

To begin, find some space—it could be inside your apartment or house, or outside. You don't need a long space. Perhaps a hallway or room, seven, eight, nine, ten steps in length. That's really all that's needed, or it could be a little longer if the room is there. This is your walking path, and you're walking back and forth. Walking meditation is not the same as going for a walk, which of course is fine to do as well, but walking meditation has a little more formality to it. We create a walking path.

You can begin by simply walking at a slightly slower than normal pace. If you were noting, for example, it might just be "left, right, left, right" or "stepping, stepping, stepping, stepping," just like that.

The important thing in walking meditation—and it's also true in sitting—is this: very often in meditation discourse, we use watching language: watch, notice, observe. That has a certain value, but it's more valuable, I think, to change the language a little bit in terms of understanding how we're practicing—to feeling language. So instead of observing the movement as if you're up in the head somewhere, looking down, even if you're not literally looking—but the sense of looking at or observing from outside—just change it to feeling language. You're walking and simply feel the movement. It's almost like you're doing Tai Chi or yoga. You're in the body, feeling the sensations of movement and touch from the inside, rather than trying to observe as if from outside.

This will make a huge difference. When I discovered this, it transformed my walking practice and made it very enjoyable and very easeful. You're just walking, taking a step, feeling the sensations of movement and touch. You could even note "movement and touch." Then in the course of the walking period, experiment with different speeds. As I say, you can begin at a slightly slower than normal pace, and then if you like, after a little time, you can begin to slow down further. Just play with different speeds.

I would really encourage you to do this. It opens up a whole new world of insight.

Thank you very much for your attention. I hope the content was not too overwhelming, but we'll explore it more both in the question period tomorrow and then in the talk the following day—actually how to free ourselves from these papañca, these proliferating tendencies that so imprison us in the sense of self.

Thank you, and have a good day.

CHAPTER 64

# Questions & Answers about Papañca 1

Joseph Goldstein · 1h22

> *In this Q&A session from a July Insight Meditation Retreat, Joseph Goldstein responds to practitioner questions about papañca and related teachings. He establishes a foundational framework using the two truths—relative (sammuti) and ultimate (paramattha)—to illuminate how we can understand both the conventional experience of self and the deeper realization of anattā (non-self). Using the analogy of a cup appearing solid conventionally yet being insubstantial at the molecular level, he explains how direct meditative insight into impermanence weakens clinging without negating our ability to function in daily life.*
>
> *Goldstein addresses the important question of identity in relation to marginalized communities, emphasizing that honoring relative identities while understanding their ultimate empty nature allows for both empowerment and freedom from fixation. He distinguishes reincarnation from rebirth using the river analogy—there is no fixed entity that transmigrates, only the continuous flow of mental and physical elements. The talk also explores mundane right view (understanding that actions have consequences through the law of kamma) and noble right view (understanding the Four Noble Truths), explaining why wrong view is considered the most dangerous defilement.*
>
> *Practical guidance includes working with guilt versus remorse—seeing guilt as an ego-strengthening pattern while remorse allows acknowledgment without identification. Goldstein clarifies that letting go through wisdom is not spiritual bypassing, which involves using concepts to avoid feeling difficult experiences. He encourages practitioners to play at the edges of their comfort zones, gradually expanding their capacity to meet all experience with equanimity and open awareness.*

Welcome back. We'll begin again with a 15-minute sit. It's just a way of settling into the practice before we address the many questions that you sent in.

Find a comfortable, relaxed, alert sitting posture. Settle into the awareness of the whole body. There is a body. Sit and know you're sitting. Be mindful of the body breathing. Keep it very relaxed—a simple, natural process of breathing. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

Notice where in the body you feel the breath most clearly: the air passing the nostrils, the movement of the chest, the abdomen, or throughout the whole body. Simply feel the sensations of each breath as it presents itself. Settle back, receptive, allowing.

If other bodily sensations arise and call your attention, open to the feeling of those sensations. They might be pleasant, might be unpleasant. Notice what happens to the sensation as you're aware of it. Notice its changing nature. Does it get stronger or weaker? Does it fade away or disappear suddenly? Simply notice.

As soon as you become aware of the mind thinking, when the mind is lost in a thought, simply notice "thinking" and then reconnect with the body sitting, with the sensations of the breath or other bodily sensations.

When you're ready, you can slowly open your eyes, become aware of seeing, reconnecting with the world around you.

---

Thank you all for sending in the many questions that you did. They were very intriguing. I probably won't be able to respond to all of them, but I did group questions together that had similar themes, ones that felt related to me.

I'm going to start with the very easiest one, which was: How do you spell *papañca*? Carlita mentioned that she put that up on the resource page of the retreat homepage, so you can check that out.

Now for the first more complicated question: "Though I can tell myself that my felt sense of self is false, it's hard to believe that's the case when society and lived experience reinforce the opposite. How can we convince ourselves that there's no self?"

There were quite a lot of questions about self and non-self, but this one may set the foundation for addressing many of the others. First, I want to say that it's not a question of convincing ourselves that there's no self. It's really a question of investigating our experience so that we are realizing from the inside what non-self means.

It can get confusing because, as the question mentioned, this is not something that is commonly understood or reinforced in society or just in our conventional, regular life. There's one framework that I think is really helpful in addressing this question of understanding the conventional use of self, the conventional experience of it, and the deeper Dharma understanding of selflessness. That is the framework talked about in various Buddhist traditions of the two truths: relative truth and more ultimate truth.

Relative truth is the experience we have of just our ordinary, conventional reality of self and other, subject and object. It's simply how we go about through the day. So in that sense, on the conventional or relative level, we could say, yes, there is some experience of self. We distinguish ourselves from others. We look in the mirror and we recognize ourselves. That's all on the level of relative reality.

More ultimate reality takes us to a deeper level where we begin to see that what we're calling self is really a concept, and that there are more underlying realities in constant change. We begin to see the insubstantiality and the flow of impermanence.

Take a very simple example, which may give you a sense of how there can be two levels of truth, two levels of experience. I'm holding up this cup. On the relative level, it's a cup. We drink out of it, it's useful, and we can describe it as a cup—its shape, its style, and all of that. So on that level, cup exists.

On another level, if we looked at that cup under a high-power microscope or under an electron microscope—seeing a very subtle level of reality—we would see that cup disappears. There's no cup at all on that level. It's just the molecular level or the atomic level or whatever it is; it's a very different experience of reality.

When we touch into that more ultimate reality of the very rapidly changing nature of the elements, that doesn't negate our experience of cup.

We still use it, we still drink from it. But to the degree that we've had some experience of this more underlying reality—the more ultimate reality in which cup really doesn't exist—we can operate on the relative level with less attachment, less clinging, because we realize that in its very nature, it's insubstantial.

Self, the notion of self, the concept of self is like cup. It does refer to what we would call Joseph—a recognizable, distinct individual. We do live, and live largely, on that level. But through our practice, we can have the very direct experience of going beyond the concept of self on the conventional level, and begin to feel this whole mind-body process quite differently, where it's just a very rapid flow of changing elements.

The benefit of this understanding is that the more we see this for ourselves—and again, it's not about trying to convince ourselves of it, not on the idea level that there's no self, but the direct experience of this more ultimate level of reality—the more freedom we have. We're using our minds in the same way we might look through a high-power microscope. We're using our minds to explore the nature of this mind-body on a different level. And we do have the experience of the whole solidity of the body and the mind disappearing, revealing just a very rapid flow of mental and physical elements.

Keep in mind that we operate on both these levels, and one does not negate the other. If we can experience both with clarity and awareness, it helps us negotiate the relative level of our lives—all the interpersonal relationships and interactions—with much more freedom, because we're not attached, we're not clinging. We haven't solidified or reified some sense of permanent self.

There were a few more questions which this framework of the two truths might help illuminate. One was about wrong view being the belief in an underlying, enduring being at the center of our being. The questioner noted that personality has a genetic component along with environmental influences, and personality is relatively enduring and slow to change. How do we reconcile the fact of personality being difficult to change with wrong view?

In the same way as before: yes, on the relative level, there is a personality, and distinct personalities. As the question noted, personality doesn't change as rapidly as when we're on the more ultimate level seeing elements arising and passing very quickly. But if we understand that personality is the pattern of elements arising, and we see that based on our understanding of the more ultimate level—where things are changing very rapidly and we're seeing the selfless, empty nature of it—then on the relative level, we're not quite so identified with our personality. We don't think of or claim the personality as being self. Rather, we see: yes, this is the conditioned pattern of our emotions, our thoughts, our way of being.

To the extent that we have some experience on the more ultimate level, the personality does become a little more malleable. We can begin to see which aspects of our personality serve us, are helpful or conducive to our happiness, and which aspects cause suffering. If we have that flexibility that comes from understanding the deeper level—that there is not a fixed core being—and we see personality just as a pattern of thoughts and emotions, we can be quite creative with our personality. Over time, by choosing more skillful ways of relating to ourselves and to others, our personalities can change. People can become kinder, more loving, more generous. This is all through seeing that there is not a fixed self and there is not a fixed personality. It's all a dynamic process.

Another related question arose which I think is really important, especially in these times: Would you speak more about conceit, *māna*, and identity? The questioner was thinking in particular about people with identities that are marginalized in our society, and how we work for justice. Claiming "I am" for those on the margins can be a radical act and provide a sense of freedom.

This is a really important point. On the relative level, we do have certain identities, and certain identities have been marginalized in our society. Part of the healing of that is acknowledging the identity on the relative level—whether it's racial identity, or identity of gender, or sexual orientation, or many other kinds of identities. We want to honor that place in us, our multiple identities. We don't want to use the teaching of selflessness to ignore the relative level of our interactions and relationships in society. On the relative level, there is an identity, and we want to understand, respect, and honor that. This is empowering for us as we move in society.

But again, if we have some experience on the more ultimate level where identity really disappears—on the level of subatomic particles, there's no identity—and there is an equivalent in our meditation experience of being somewhat analogously on that subatomic particle level, experiencing this mind-body process in that way, then we see that on that level, there is no fixed identity. We can then operate on the relative level understanding that it is the relative level, but an important one, because this is the level on which we operate a lot in the world. We can engage with it without so much attachment, without so much fixation. This actually makes us a lot more creative in our response to the challenges that may arise with regard to our relative identities.

I want to emphasize how important this is. This issue has come up a lot. In the recent teacher training we just finished at IMS—a training that very much emphasized training teachers of color—the issue of identity came up frequently. How do we understand its importance while also understanding that on another level, the notion of identity disappears?

How do we integrate these two levels? It's just the same as the example I used with the cup—understanding that on the subatomic particle level there's no cup, and yet I drink from the cup. This is really the maturity, I think, of spiritual practice, where we learn how to integrate and harmonize these two levels.

There was another somewhat related question: Are there examples that can be shared of knowing when and if to move beyond awareness and acceptance and into response and action? And how does the Dharma experience suggest developing that skill? This tied in also to other questions about the practice being about allowing, and yet when do we act?

Again, it goes back to an understanding of the two truths. When we're on the level of more ultimate truth, we're really in just the experience of things arising and passing. We're in that flow of the rapidly changing elements. Then there's no cause to act based on that level. But at the very same time as that's happening, we are living in the relative world and we have to respond.

One way of understanding the response—and when a response is called for rather than simply allowing things to come and go—is when some harm is involved, some harm to ourselves, some harm to others.

Just as an example, a slightly perhaps amusing one: years ago when I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya, it was a small Indian village, but it was the place of the Buddha's enlightenment—an important spiritual place. In the village, one of the great landowners had a working elephant, so we'd often see the elephant walking on the streets. Not infrequently I would be walking into the local bazaar for something, walking down the road, and the elephant would be coming towards me. At that point, I wasn't just saying, "seeing, seeing, seeing," thinking, "Oh, this is all empty." I stepped out of the way, because clearly if I didn't, a great deal of harm to me would have been done.

Understanding the more ultimate level of just the rapidly changing flow of elements doesn't negate the necessity of responding on the relative level to the circumstances that we find ourselves in. Particularly in cases where harm might be done, we need to respond, whether it's harm to ourselves or harm to others. That's when action is really called for.

We may come back to some elements of this with other questions, but I'll move on now. Another question was: Can you explain what reincarnates or endures through lifetimes, which is not self?

Given the Buddha's teaching on many lives, this is a question that often comes up. There's no self who goes from life to life. This ties in a little bit to what I mentioned yesterday about "who" being the wrong question. It's really about *what* goes from life to life.

This points to a bit of a difference between the term reincarnation and rebirth. Many people confuse these two terms or conflate them, thinking they're synonymous. They're not exactly the same. Reincarnation is generally understood to imply some being that goes from life to life. In ancient India, it was called the Atman, or the soul—something, some "who," which goes from this life to the next life and is carried over.

The Buddha had a very different notion of this whole process. Instead of calling it reincarnation, the term used is rebirth. I'll explain the difference with an analogy, which may give you some sense of this whole process and understanding how there can be rebirth without a self.

Think of a river. We all know what a river is. We go and perhaps stand by the side of a river and we see the river. But the real question is, what *is* the river? The river is the flow of water. The river is not something in and of itself different than the flowing wa-

ter flowing according to the topography. "River" is a concept. The word, the term "river," is a concept—a designation for that process of the flowing water. But river as a thing in itself doesn't exist. It's just a concept, a useful one, as many concepts are. A concept that is a designation for something. And what is it the designation for? The flow of water.

Self is the same thing, the same level of understanding as river. Self is a concept that we use as a designation for the flow of these mental and physical elements that are arising and passing very quickly, which we can see for ourselves in meditation. But there's no self apart from the flow of changing elements. It's not that this mind-body process belongs to something apart from it.

The term *self* or *Joseph* is simply a way of designating the particular flow of these mind-body elements. And it's this flow which goes on from life to life. It's not that there is something, some being, which is carried over from this life to the next. Rather, it's just a continuation of the very same process that is happening in this life.

So I hope you get some sense of how we can use the term *self*. We can use the term *Joseph* and *I*, *me* and *mine*—use all of those as concepts. They're useful as designating certain processes. But they do not exist as some substantial entity independent of the process. The concept is simply pointing to it.

And just to further the analogy of the river, we might think of rebirth from life to life as the river flowing through different terrains. One life might be the river of life flowing through meadows and grasslands. Then maybe it flows through a different kind of terrain. We might think of each life as being a particular terrain through which this river of life processes is flowing on.

I hope this was more clarifying than confusing, but I hope it illuminates the fact that we can use the concepts if we understand that they're concepts and not a substantial reality in themselves. When we look to what the concept is pointing to—so the concept of self is pointing to this mind-body process—then through our practice, we drop into that more ultimate level of the experience of it. We experience for ourselves the flowing, impermanent nature of all of these elements. There is nothing fixed. There is nothing solid.

This understanding then has tremendous implications for how we live our life on the relative level, on the conventional level. Because to the extent that we understand the selfless nature of this process, the changing nature, we begin to weaken the very deeply conditioned habit pattern of clinging, of grasping, of holding on. To the degree that we are really experiencing the changing nature of things, that insight into imper-

manence on a very subtle level begins to decondition the very strong habit pattern of grasping and clinging. And the less we cling to that which is changing, the less we suffer.

So it all comes down to—I think I mentioned this yesterday—when the Buddha was asked what he teaches, he said he teaches just one thing: suffering and its end. Everything we're talking about, even these more subtle levels of understanding the more ultimate reality and the selfless nature of things, are all in the service of freeing ourselves from those causes and conditions that create suffering in our lives, for ourselves and for others.

Another question arose: What advice or practices might be offered to teachers of young children? How can we have the most impact within our classrooms or with our families to teach in a certain way that would not perpetuate the cycle of conditioning around "me, me, me," so that children get at an early age an introduction to these concepts? How can we foster this awareness from the beginning rather than later as adults, working so hard to undo the unconscious social conditioning placed upon us throughout our lives?

This is, I think, a really important question, especially for those who have children or are working with children. Obviously, it's not going to work to give a philosophic analysis of self and non-self. That's completely inappropriate in this situation. But what can be conveyed is to emphasize those ways of being, those practices and behaviors, that weaken the sense of self in their very nature.

For example, teaching and modeling—probably even more important than any words we use—teaching and modeling generosity. Generosity is the act of letting go, of non-clinging. Modeling kindness rather than selfishness. Modeling inclusion rather than exclusion of people around us. All of this, in just modeling wise behavior, is actually weakening the manifestation of self-centeredness.

And I think that term, *self-centered*, is really a good entranceway or doorway to understanding selflessness. Just in our common parlance, most people understand what self-centered means. They don't necessarily think of it on the deepest level of self, but it's easily understood as being more concerned with oneself than others. So it's pretty easy to understand: How can we teach children to be less self-centered? This is not necessarily some abstruse philosophical Buddhist doctrine. It's just a way of modeling skillful behavior in the world that has deep transformative power as it becomes more integrated in the lives of both children and ourselves as adults.

Just one example of a change in patterns of behavior was very striking to me. This happened maybe forty or forty-five years ago and really stuck in my mind. At the time I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya, and in a time between retreats, there was a group of us Westerners staying at the Burmese Vihara. We were just having a little social gathering one evening among friends. There was one woman there who was a musician, and she said she had written a song about each of us, highlighting each person.

And I, and perhaps the others too, just assumed that it would be a kind of humorous roast, where she would pick out our foibles and create a song about that. But it turns out she didn't do that at all. What she did was highlight what she saw as the really good qualities, the beautiful qualities in each of us. And she wrote a song about that. So instead of a roast, it became a toast to each of us.

It was so surprising to me because it was so not what I expected, but it was tremendously uplifting. Everybody felt really good. And of course, this way of relating to people is the very foundation of metta practice, of loving-kindness practice, where it's said we develop metta towards beings by focusing on their good qualities.

And yet it would be interesting just to notice: what is our pattern? When we're with people, either people we know well or those we've just met, what is our first response or way of relating? Is the mind focusing on the difficult aspects of their personality, or are we focusing on their really good or beautiful qualities, even as we see the other part? So it's not having some Hallmark vision of people and pretending that everything's all beautiful and all good. No, people are complex. We're all a mix. But can we direct our minds to emphasize the good in people?

And of course, just as I felt when this woman was singing this toast to us all and felt uplifted, when we focus on the good in others, that's a beautiful foundation for relationship, for relating, for inclusion rather than exclusion. And all of this can be taught to young children, right from a very early age.

Another question: "How does one act consistently when not lying—telling the truth—produces harm or pain? Am I responsible for another's response to a truthful statement?"

This, I think, is a really important question as we explore what right speech means in the context of our path. And I just want to emphasize that I find speech to be an enormously fruitful arena for meditation practice. It's one step on the Eightfold Path—right at the center of the Eightfold Path—right speech. And given how much of the day we spend talking, it's really important to bring mindfulness to our speech.

Just as a little aside, I'm reminded of another question that was asked about how we can become more aware of volition and intention, that it seems very subtle and hard to catch. Well, it's pretty easy to see intention before we speak. If we're mindful enough, we can be aware that we're about to say something. Can we really be mindful of that intention to speak, that "about to" moment before the words come tumbling out, and then see: is this wise speech or not wise speech? So right there, we can get a very clear sense of the experience of intention and volition. It's that "about to" moment before the action takes place.

Going back to the original question, one guideline that the Buddha gave for right speech, which very much addresses this, is that we should speak only that which is true *and* useful. That's an important addition. Because something might be true, but it may not be the right time. It may not be the right place to actually express that truth. And if we're aware that we're about to say something, we want to consider: is this going to be useful? Is this going to be helpful to the other person?

If it's both true and useful, then it should be spoken, even if it causes some discomfort to the other person—because at least in our assessment, in our judgment, we see that this could be a useful time to say this. But if something is true and it's not a useful or skillful time, then it's not wise speech to give voice to it. Then we want to restrain, refrain from that, and wait till a more appropriate time. So you can just keep in mind this very simple guideline: wise speech is both true and useful. That, I think, can really help guide us in when to speak and when not to.

So another question, which is really quite big, and I can just touch on it a little bit: "Can you please expand a bit on what the Buddha said is so harmful in the belief in a core, unchanging, underlying self at the center of our being?"

If you remember, I think I mentioned yesterday that the Buddha talked about how wrong view is the most dangerous of all the defilements. And in the context of yesterday's talk, I was referring to that aspect of wrong view—the wrong view of self. But right view and wrong view as part of the Eightfold Path is much bigger. It has more components than just the view of self. The view of self is just one aspect of wrong view. So I'll be interchanging wrong view and right view, but realize that in our investigation, by understanding one, we naturally will understand the other.

So the Buddha talked about two different levels of right view. And this, in a way, relates to the framework of the two truths—the relative truth and the more ultimate truth. Buddha talked about mundane right view, or worldly right view, and then what he called noble or liberating right view.

Mundane right view, worldly right view—there are many particular, specific aspects of it, but they all in a way revolve around the right view of understanding that actions have consequences, which is really an expression of the law of karma. This understanding is interwoven into all of the Buddhist teachings: that actions have consequences. Wrong view would be not understanding that, or not believing it, or not paying attention to it.

Now, the reason this wrong view is so harmful is because if we don't believe that our actions have consequences—both in the moment and long-term in terms of karmic results—then we may not be that motivated to engage in an active way with discerning which of our actions are wholesome, which of our thoughts are wholesome, and which are unwholesome, which are unskillful. If we don't discern that, then we're just going to be playing out whatever the particular conditioning of our lives happens to be. And so we'll probably be doing a lot of unwholesome actions which bring about suffering—suffering to ourselves, suffering to other people. This is one reason why wrong view is so dangerous: if we don't understand the truth of the law of karma.

And it's not some mystical thing. It's really just the understanding that everything we do—actions of our body, of our speech, of our mind—has consequences. It brings results. Every action is like planting a seed. If we plant an apple seed and expect a mango, we're not going to be very fulfilled. We want to understand what seeds lead to what results. The Buddha was very clear about this. And the beauty and the power of his teachings is that he understood with such clarity this basic law of nature. When Vruni was speaking yesterday about the refuges and refuge in the Dharma, meaning the lawful nature of things—this is one aspect of that. One aspect of the lawful nature is this law that actions have consequences. So this is mundane right and wrong view. And I think you can see that without this understanding, we will get caught up, just out of habit patterns and conditioning, in a lot of unwholesome actions that will bring about suffering, because we haven't really internalized this strong understanding of right view that actions do bring results.

On the level of noble right view—what you could call the level of right view that actually liberates us—this is not only what gives us guidelines for actions in the world that bring about worldly happiness. The liberative right view, the noble right view, is what actually leads to freedom in the mind. And this noble right view has many different aspects as well, but one foundational expression of this liberative right view is an understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

Understanding or realizing the truth of dukkha—sometimes it's translated as suffering, as unreliability, as things being ultimately unsatisfying simply because nothing lasts, everything is changing. So even though we experience many pleasant things in our lives that are not suffering, even the pleasant things are unreliable as a source of lasting happiness, precisely because they don't last. This understanding of the first noble truth of dukkha is really important, especially as we explore the second noble truth, which is the cause of suffering. What is the cause behind the suffering, behind this dukkha? And the Buddha highlighted the essential role of craving or clinging as being the source of suffering in our lives.

This all fits together because in this noble right view, we are seeing—and through our meditative practice we're seeing—the impermanent nature on a very microscopic level, although we can see it on any level that we look at. Change is pervasive on all levels, but when we see it on the microscopic level in our meditation practice and we're experiencing this whole mind-body process as just a very rapid flow of elements, that very seeing deconditions grasping, deconditions clinging. And yet when we don't have this liberative right view of the truth of dukkha and the cause of dukkha and the way to free ourselves from the cause of dukkha, then we just go on in the ordinary flow of our lives, getting caught up in clinging to the pleasant and having aversion to the unpleasant. We just get further enmeshed in this whole samsaric unfolding.

So this is another way that wrong view is very dangerous—because it keeps us locked in to the very causes of suffering. And noble right view, liberative right view, frees us from those causes. We begin to feel for ourselves, even in momentary ways perhaps, or over time for longer and longer periods, that we really can taste the third noble truth, which is the end of suffering.

I'm reminded just in this moment of a really important realization I had. This goes back not to the beginning of my practice—maybe fifteen years ago or something like that. I was sitting, and for some reason I was reflecting on the Four Noble Truths and about the third noble truth being the end of craving. Craving being the cause of suffering, the end of suffering is the end of craving. The Buddha was very explicit about this. After his enlightenment, he said, "Realized is the unconditioned, achieved is the end of craving." A very explicit statement about what frees and liberates the heart and mind.

But I had always held that understanding of the third noble truth as some far-off goal. It made total sense to me. But I thought, yeah, maybe in twenty years or thirty years or five lifetimes or however long, I'll come to the end of craving.

And so I was practicing with that as a goal far in the future. As my sweatshirt story revealed, I think there's still a little way to go to come to the final end of craving.

However, in that sitting I'm talking about now, I had a sudden change of understanding. It was about realizing that yes, the complete uprooting of craving is probably some way off. But we can experience the end of craving for a moment—in this moment. In the letting go, we let go of the craving, the wanting, the clinging. We can experience the mind that is free of that kind of desire. And in that moment, for those moments, even if it's just for a few moments, we are actually tasting what we could call the peace of temporary nibbana, the end of suffering.

It's not the final end. There's still more craving in there. But for that period of time, we have a real taste of it. And this became tremendously energizing for me in the practice, and in a way highlighted what the practice is actually about.

Yesterday I was speaking about one kind of craving—the craving for becoming. We can see this in our meditation practice, where very often we're practicing for this or that experience. We want to become in that way. But highlighting the fact that we can practice the end of craving in this moment reminds us that the practice is really not about getting some new experience. The real heart of the practice is letting go of that wanting. We can actually do that and experience it for ourselves. As I say, it might just be for a few moments, but it's a genuine taste of that possibility of freedom.

So I hope this answers in some way the question of why wrong view can be so dangerous—it just entangles us, often without our even understanding why or how, in suffering. If we don't really understand that actions have consequences, then we're not paying attention to whether our actions are skillful or unskillful. When we don't pay attention to our exploration of the Four Noble Truths—of suffering or dukkha and its causes, and the end of dukkha through the end of craving—then we just stay enmeshed in the patterns of our conditioning. This is why there's so much danger in wrong view, and so much potential and possibility of freedom in right view.

Right view is really reminding us that this whole path is a path of happiness. That's what the Buddha was teaching—all the different kinds of happiness, both worldly and mundane, and also the happiness of liberation.

This is just a brief summary of right and wrong view. If you'd like to explore it further, I'd recommend, if any of you happen to have a copy of my book *Mindfulness*—a rather large book—I have two chapters on right view where I go into much more detail about the different aspects of it.

So there were a few questions, all related. One was: Could you speak about spiritual bypassing?

Here's another which is related in a way: "I am noting flooding from an interaction with my daughter and feeling resentment and hurt. How do I work with this in practice? How does anatta, selflessness, pertain to this?"

And then there were a few others. One said: "In your example of losing mindfulness at retreat and responding by letting go of your sense of self, you might have gone the other way and experienced fully how terrible you felt about yourself. Comment on these two apparently opposite ways of responding."

The last related question was: "I often wake with horrible thoughts about what I did or didn't do as a young mother. My children are now in their forties, are beautiful people, and don't hold resentment towards me or their upbringing. Now that I know a small bit about papañca, how do I work with these thoughts to turn them from self-abuse to compassion?"

In some way, they're all related—about what spiritual bypassing is and what it isn't.

A spiritual bypass is when we use a dharma concept to avoid acknowledging or feeling or experiencing what we're actually going through. If we're having some difficult experience—it could be any of the ones mentioned—some difficult emotion, and we say, "Oh, it's all empty," and then we just dismiss it and don't deal with it, that's what a spiritual bypass is.

In our practice, letting go of those feelings or emotions or thoughts that are causing us suffering is not a question of denying them or just using a concept—"Oh, it's all empty, it doesn't matter"—which isn't going to work anyway. The practice of applying our understanding of selflessness is not on the concept level. It's not just thinking, "Oh yeah, things are selfless," and then everything's fine. No, it comes from the realization of things being empty of self. When we have, to some degree—whatever level we do—some understanding of the selfless nature...

And of the workings of māna, of conceit, of claiming things to be "I am." "Oh, I'm so terrible." Or "I'm so bad for some actions that I may have done."

We really want to acknowledge, to start with the acknowledgment of how we're feeling and actually feel it. We feel the upset. We feel the self-criticism or the self-judgment. So we're not denying it. We're not pretending that it's not there. We actually are in the experience of it, but not staying in that experience if it's simply causing us suffering. That's like holding onto a hot burning coal and thinking, "Well, I should be holding onto it because I really did do something wrong." We justify those feelings to ourselves and then think we should hold on to them. But that doesn't make sense because we're just holding on to suffering.

So once we have acknowledged, once we have embodied, once we feel what we're feeling, that's when we can begin to investigate and remind ourselves of the selfless nature of those thoughts, of those emotions. As I was speaking yesterday, just by saying, "Oh yes, this is just māna. This is just the identifying with that emotion." That's the māna. And as soon as we see that identification as being the working of that particular defilement of the mind—"Oh, that's just māna"—it really releases our grip on that particular unwholesome or suffering state.

So it's really important to begin to see this. There's one discernment that I think is a furtherance of this understanding, one example of freeing ourselves from identification with these painful states while acknowledging them at the same time. This is the discernment of the difference between guilt and remorse.

This is something, an experience I had that goes back many years, more toward the beginning of my practice. I was doing a retreat at IMS, and I don't even remember the details of the story, but for whatever reason, something had come to mind and I was feeling really guilty about it. The guilt was really strong. I was really beating myself up.

At a certain point—and I think I've mentioned this—for myself, when I'm suffering, it really piques my interest. I want to find out, I want to investigate what's causing this suffering. So after some time of just drowning in the guilt, I started looking more carefully. What is going on here? And I began to see that guilt is just an ego trip. It was just strengthening the sense of I, of self, in a negative way. "I'm so bad, I'm so awful, look what I did." I, I, I—as I say, in a negative way, in a way that causes suffering.

As soon as I saw that guilt was just a trick of the ego, that was like one of those moments: "Māra, I see you"—this force trying to draw us into suffering. Then I began to see an alternative. Yes, I may have done something that was unwholesome, unskillful, that initially caused all this guilt to arise. But when I saw that guilt was an ego trip, the alternative is what I'm calling—people might have their own word for it—remorse.

In the feeling of remorse, there is the acknowledgment that yes, we did something that was not skillful, that may have caused some harm, caused some suffering. We see that, we acknowledge it, we make amends if possible. But we're also understanding it from a place of wisdom, of seeing the selfless nature of it. That act, that unwholesome act, doesn't define us. It was just an act that had certain consequences. In the field of wisdom and remorse, we see that, we understand, we take responsibility for it, but we also see the impermanence and the flow. And so we can actually forgive ourselves because we have acknowledged it, we have taken responsibility for it, and we're not locking it in with this feeling of guilt, which is just strengthening the ego in all of it.

I hope you see that this really is all related to spiritual bypassing and how we can be with things—either by denying them, which is not very helpful or skillful, or by opening to them, feeling them, and then freeing ourselves from our enmeshment in the suffering. This has to do with seeing the impermanence and the selfless nature of it all. I find that this discernment between guilt and remorse has really been helpful because, of course, in our lives we all do things that are unskillful at different times. And so we want some way of relating that's healthy, where we can see it, acknowledge it, and also let go and move on.

There was one question that was a little amusing to me: "When you were out doing walking meditation in the cold wind, getting lost in Hawaii dreams, what kept you from going inside and putting on a coat instead?" There was another similar question about walking: "Why didn't I just walk inside?"

Well, of course, I did have a coat on in that very cold weather. But the question brought up a quality that at times I've found really helpful in the practice: being willing to play at the edges of our discomfort. For me, even though it was this ice-burning cold—and I didn't stay out there that long—I was interested. I was just interested in experiencing that intense cold. It was painful, but I just wanted to feel it. What is this like?

What does unbearable mean? And this is not like masochistic self-torture. I was actually interested in what's the nature of the mind, the nature of awareness that knows this unpleasantness. Just being willing at times to play at these edges of our comfort zone.

And it doesn't have to be outside in the cold. It can be just in our sitting practice when we're feeling some discomfort. It could be physical discomfort. It could be emotional discomfort. And maybe we'll see the tendency just to pull back because we don't want to feel the unpleasantness of it.

Well, an important part of the practice is when there feels like there's enough balance and interest—there's no compulsion, we shouldn't be forcing ourselves to do this—it's really playing, as I say, playing at the edges. Because we all have a comfort zone, this level of experience we're okay with, and then maybe we have some experience that's pushing at those edges where we're not relaxed, we're not open, we're not accepting of it. Can we spend a little time right at that edge seeing if we can relax? Open, let me feel it. Let me feel the pain, let me feel the discomfort, let me feel this difficult emotion. Can I come to a place of acceptance rather than pulling back into our comfort zone?

As we do this, in some way, I think this is the trajectory of our practice. When I imagine the Buddha mind—and this is just my imagination—but when I imagine the Buddha mind and the trajectory toward Buddha mind, one of the ways I think of it is this: we each have our comfort zone, we come to the edge, we relax, we open. And our zone gets a little wider. Again, wider, wider, wider. And my imagination of the Buddha mind is a mind without edges. A mind without boundaries. Where whatever arises is just arising in the field, we could say, of emptiness or selflessness or the field of wisdom. No boundaries, no edges, and therefore no fear.

I find this a useful way of understanding how our practice deepens and how it grows and how we get stronger and more inclusive of all the aspects of our experience. And we can't force it. One of the things I love about this practice is it's very organic. We don't have to force ourselves into anything. We just have to be willing to be interested—to be interested in our own experience, to be interested in times of suffering and investigating: what's the cause of this suffering? How is my mind getting caught up? How is it getting enmeshed? And of course, this is a lot of what I was talking about yesterday—those three tendencies which do enmesh us in suffering.

There were quite a few other really interesting questions, so maybe just in the next couple of days we'll have a chance to explore some of those as well.

Thank you for your attention. I hope you get as excited about Dharma practice as I do. The Buddhist teaching is just such an amazing gift to us all, because the Buddha had such clarity about how this mind, this whole mind-body process is working. And it's not theoretical, it's not philosophical. He saw it through his own experience, and the teachings allow us to experience it all for ourselves and to test it, to see for ourselves whether this is true or not.

Thank you again for your attention, and I'll see you tomorrow.

CHAPTER 65

# Papañca 2: Craving, Conceit, and Wrong View

Joseph Goldstein · 1h12


*In this continuation of teachings on papañca (mental proliferation), Joseph Goldstein offers practical methods for freeing ourselves from the three proliferating tendencies that construct our sense of self: craving, conceit, and wrong view. Drawing from the Buddha's instructions to his son Rāhula, Goldstein presents the liberating reflection: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself" as a mantra of liberation applicable to all experience across the five khandhas (aggregates).*

*Goldstein shares several accessible exercises for directly experiencing impermanence and non-self. The first involves holding the question "What is being known?" moment after moment, which naturally shifts our linguistic framework from active to passive voice, dissolving the sense of an "I" doing the knowing. The second practice involves contemplating how experiences continuously fall away—noticing that the step from five minutes ago, one minute ago, even one second ago, has completely vanished. The third exercise uses the classical framework of physical elements (earth, air, fire, water), noting sensations of movement as "air element" and touch as "earth element," which immediately reveals their non-personal nature.*

*The talk beautifully demonstrates how understanding selflessness naturally manifests as the four brahmavihāras—mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā. Through personal stories from his time in India and Boulder, Goldstein illustrates how letting go of "I, me, mine" allows loving-kindness and compassion to arise spontaneously. He concludes with the Buddha's final teaching at his parinibbāna: "Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Practice with heedfulness."*


We'll continue in our discussion of papañca. Over these last couple of days, we've discussed in some detail the powerful proliferating tendencies of mind and how they help to construct all lived experience. As I've mentioned many times now, these are the forces of craving, of conceit, and wrong view, all of which are rooted in and further condition the sense of self.

So the question and challenge for us, and what I'd like to talk about today, is how to weaken and ultimately free ourselves from this source of suffering and difficulty in our lives.

There's one general principle which underlies our practice of this freedom. And really it's a quite obvious one given everything that we've talked about. The instruction was given by the Buddha to his son Rahula. One discourse from the texts gives the background, a little story. The Buddha and Rahula were walking into a village for alms round, and Rahula was following the Buddha. In some lapse of mindfulness, Rahula looked up and he started reflecting on just the beauty of the Buddha's form. Then, reflecting that as the son of the Buddha, he bore a resemblance to the Buddha, he was feeling good about that.

Well, as the story goes, the Buddha knew what was going on in Rahula's mind. He stopped and turned back. This is how the sutta describes it: "Then the Blessed One looked back and addressed Rahula thus: 'Rahula, any kind of material form—the body and all other material elements—should be seen as they are with perfect wisdom. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.'"

Then Rahula asks the Buddha, "Does this apply only to material forms?" And the Buddha replied, "No—material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness"—namely the five aggregates, which really is one description of everything. The Buddha is saying we should regard every experience of any of the physical elements, the elements of mind, consciousness itself: This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

This very clear and straightforward teaching is a corrective to the three ways we create and strengthen and manifest the sense of self in our lives. We could think of it, in a way, as a mantra of liberation—pointing us again and again to the possibility of freedom.

Philip Larkin, the English poet, captured the motivation behind this investigation, this instruction, when he wrote, "I'm tired of going around pretending to be me." I love that. I'm tired of going around pretending to be me.

The challenge, of course, is finding different ways of remembering this, of putting it into practice and seeing for ourselves its benefit, experiencing the ease and the joy of release from the imprisoning construct of self.

Fortunately, a fundamental key to understanding selflessness—which is not immediately intuitively obvious, as I'm sure most of you realize by now—is something very obvious but often overlooked: investigating with greater precision and greater refinement the truth of change.

Look very closely, the Japanese poet Ikkyu wrote. Only impermanence lasts. This floating world, too, will pass.

That is such a good reminder. Only impermanence lasts. That is the truth of change. Even this floating world and everything in it will pass.

As I've mentioned, it's not hard to understand this conceptually. We all know that things change. It's not an esoteric truth. But we don't usually apply the wisdom of that understanding into our daily lives.

The Buddha often used similes and metaphors to bring his teachings home, because sometimes a simple image can reveal a deeper understanding, or highlight a deeper understanding, than a long philosophical discourse. So I'd like to offer one image highlighting this very fundamental teaching of the Buddha, namely that everything changes. We really should make that our mantra of liberation, to remind ourselves.

The image is expressed in very few words in a short poem called "Samsara"—the wheeling around of conditioned existence: *Samsara, castles of sand at water's edge.*

Take a moment just to conjure up this image in your mind. Castles of sand, sandcastles at water's edge. The fragility and the impermanence of these constructions, these sandcastles, are so clear. A wave comes and washes them away, washes away our carefully constructed castle, whatever that castle might be. Or maybe a heavy rain comes and demolishes the sandcastle. Or maybe a gaggle of kids comes along the beach and just stomps on it. The castle of sand has no intrinsic stability, no intrinsic existence. So obviously it's subject and vulnerable to changing conditions.

So then we might ask, what do the sandcastles represent? Everything that is constructed, everything that arises out of conditions. And upon reflection, we see that this includes everything—our bodies, our minds, the whole external world. Everything arises out of causes and conditions.

This is true on every level of magnitude. This process of change, of creation and destruction, of birth and death, of arising and passing away, is happening on every level. As I think I've mentioned, we might think of the changing nature of galaxies and stars, of planets, of civilizations, of societies, of individuals with all of their various thoughts and feelings and life stories, of cells and molecules and atoms and subatomic particles. All are castles in the sand. Nothing at all, in this whole range of phenomena, is stable and fixed.

When we investigate our own experience of impermanence through mindfulness, with greater and greater clarity, we see that nothing is really lasting long enough to be considered self. Our bodies are always changing. Thoughts and images and emotions come and go. And even consciousness itself, which we often identify as the being of self

—but as our practice deepens and the mindfulness strengthens, we see that consciousness itself is arising and passing in each moment. It is a process rather than some fixed, stable entity.

What we're calling self, or what I might call Joseph, is not some stable reality in itself, but as I mentioned, it is a designation. It's a useful concept designating the kaleidoscope of appearances, of continual change. This is what we want to see in our practice.

Now there's another aspect to this as well. We see that all of these changes are following their own natural laws. They're not simply subject to our will and wishes. The body will age and die regardless of how we feel about that. It is just a natural law. This is nature. And the mind, as we all know, often feels as if it has a mind of its own. We see that in very many respects, it is ungovernable. If we could really govern our minds, we could just say, okay, no more unskillful thoughts, no more difficult emotions. That would be easy if that could happen. But it doesn't happen like that, because everything is following what we could call natural law.

There is, however, a possibility of directing outcomes to some extent, if we understand the laws governing the conditions necessary for a desired outcome.

And we understand what conditions are necessary, then we can cultivate those conditions. Hopefully, at least some of the time, we will experience the outcome that we desire.

This is really the great gift of the Buddha's teachings, because he laid out so clearly the conditions and causes for suffering in our lives, and he laid out the conditions and causes for greater ease, greater peace, greater freedom in our lives.

So given this deep understanding and experience of continuous change—like the flowing water of a river—and that conditions are not simply subject to our will, the Buddha's instruction to Rahula, which we really want to understand as the Buddha's instruction to us, becomes a very direct pointing to the possibility of freedom. Again, to remind you, in the Buddha's words: "See everything with perfect wisdom. This is not mine. This is not I. This is not myself."

Of course, a very big question remains: how do we actually practice this liberating understanding, not only in formal meditation, but really in the busyness of our lives in the world, in the midst of our daily ordinary activities?

Going back to the story of the Buddha and Rahula. The Buddha gave Rahula these instructions, and as I said, they were walking into town for alms. After the Buddha gave these instructions, it is said that Rahula had this thought: "Who would go into town for alms after personally being instructed and exhorted by the Buddha himself?" And so he turned around and sat down at the foot of a tree for the day's meditation.

But happily, there are some very simple and direct ways to explore this teaching, even in the midst of taking a meal or different activities of our lives. I'd like to share with you one practice which I've found particularly helpful and illuminating. That is taking some time—it could be a short period, maybe five minutes or ten minutes—and holding the question in mind, moment after moment: what is being known? That's all. Very simple. We just settle back and become aware, pay attention, be mindful of what is being known moment after moment.

For example, with eating, the conventional answer to the question "What are you doing?" would be "I'm eating"—thereby strengthening that sense of "I am," strengthening the sense of "my food." Just for a moment, reflect on how pervasive these proliferating tendencies are. That response would be the very normal response that all of us would have in answering that question. It's just to see how craving, conceit, and wrong view really infiltrate almost every part of our lives, continually reinforcing the sense of self, the sense of an "I" doing it all.

But with interest and with strong mindfulness and investigation, holding the question moment after moment—what is being known?—we see that experiences are really arising and passing away moment after moment. What we call eating, or what we might say "I'm eating," are really sequential moments of the sensations of chewing and tasting and swallowing, interspersed probably with moments of knowing sounds, knowing sights, knowing thoughts. All of these things are being known: the sensations of chewing and tasting and swallowing being known, the sound being known, a thought being known.

When the mind is settled back into each of these experiences with bare attention, seeing how each one of these experiences—which are very simple, very ordinary; we don't have to have been practicing for thirty years to be aware of all of these moments being known—we see for ourselves directly how quickly they're all arising and changing and passing away moment after moment.

When we see this, and this would be very helpful to notice if you make this experiment, when we're with our experience in this way, settled back in a relaxed way, it really becomes quite effortless. Just, "Okay, what is being known?" Different sensations of chewing, tasting, swallowing, hearing, seeing, thinking. When we settle back in that

mode, there is no forward leaning into the next moment. In eating, for example, no wanting or craving a new taste even while we still have food in our mouths from the last mouthful.

It's so interesting just to notice how conditioned we are to be leaning forward. It's that craving for becoming, craving for a new hit of sense pleasure, how it keeps us leaning forward, anticipating, wanting, craving—all rooted in that sense of "I," of "I am." But when we settle back and simply are aware of different things being known, all of that falls away. We really come to a place of much greater ease, much greater balance in our lives. There is no sense of "I," no sense of "I'm the one eating." There's no agitation or perturbation of mind.

Here I want to highlight the importance of language and how the language we use to describe our experience can so deeply condition our understanding without even realizing it. I've mentioned how we basically misunderstand the meaning of the word "self," taking it to be something real, something substantial, rather than being a simple designation for a changing process, for the unfolding process of our lives.

In this exercise of holding the question "What is being known?" it changes our usual linguistic framework, just in the framing of this question in this way. It changes the linguistic framework from the active voice to the passive voice. In the active voice, generally, we would say, "I'm eating," "I'm walking," "I'm doing this," "I'm doing that"—subject, verb, object. This very common use of language, the most common, is how we usually speak and write in the active voice.

Unknowingly, it's reinforcing the sense of I, the sense of self, because that's how we're constructing our language about experience. It's so interesting that this use of language already posits the I—someone knowing these things, someone doing these things.

And although writing teachers will often advise against using the passive voice, in this particular meditative context, I have found it amazingly useful. When we relanguage what is happening—relanguage to ourselves, not necessarily giving voice to it aloud—when we relanguage our experience from "I'm knowing this taste, I'm knowing this sound" to "a taste being known, a sound being known, a thought being known," just in this construction, there is no self, there is no I. Sounds being known. It is so simple.

As you do this exercise, you can also try it in walking. This is where I first began playing with this, and I found it so helpful. I was doing walking meditation, framing it in this way: just the sensations of movement being known. The whole walking practice

became so effortless because the knowing was happening quite spontaneously. Just movement being known, touch being known. We begin to find that greater sense of ease—we could even say spontaneity—in the knowing of our unfolding experience.

There's another practice that quickly reveals the momentary nature, the changing nature of experience. This is an exercise in seeing how things are continually falling away. Generally, in meditation, there is a whole stage of insight where we're seeing just the rapid disappearance of things. But there's another way of experiencing this that's available very easily. We don't have to have gone to any great depth in our meditation practice.

It came to me one day when I was just going for a walk—an ordinary walk on a beautiful day along a country road. At a certain point, the thought came into my mind: what happened to the step of five minutes ago? And I realized that step was completely gone, no trace of it left. And then I thought, what about the step of four minutes ago, or three minutes ago, or two minutes ago? Completely gone. That experience was no longer there. And then one minute ago, thirty seconds ago, ten seconds ago, one second ago—I just brought my mind right up to the moment. Having gone on that trajectory, it was so clear, seeing how things are continually falling away, falling away, falling away. It's like water over a waterfall.

I would suggest, if you like, to play with this, because it gives such an immediate and direct experience of the impermanent insubstantiality of experience. It's no longer about Buddhist philosophy. It's about our own direct experience of this truth of change in a very immediate and powerful way. Being on that cusp of change, things falling away, it becomes so clear that it's not even possible to hold on to things when we're seeing that directly.

So we can use the exercise of "what's being known." We can begin to play with this sense of being on the cusp of things falling away moment after moment and really inhabiting that experience. And there's yet a third way, suggested very specifically by the Buddha, which again proves to be a very direct and immediate experience of not mine, not I, not myself. This is using the framework of the physical elements, which reveals the importance of how we language things, how conditioning the language we use can be, and how language can reinforce the subtleties of *papañca* even without our realizing.

In this particular exercise, using the framework of the physical elements as a way of languaging our experience, I want to remind you that in the classical texts, the Buddha used a kind of shorthand common in those times to describe the felt experience of the different physical elements. Here we're not talking about the periodic table of elements

that we might have learned in chemistry class. This is quite something different. Here we are actually using terminology to describe the felt experience of different physical sensations, classically described in the Buddhist texts as the earth, air, fire, and water elements.

So we're doing walking meditation, keeping in mind that we're going to bring in this framework of the elements. What's interesting to notice is that even when we're being mindful of the movement, there can be a certain subtle overlay of an impression: I'm walking. It's not that the thought is even active in the mind, but there's almost a subtle sense in the way we're holding our experience—I'm walking—even as we're being mindful of the different sensations. Or there could be an almost subliminal overlay of the image of foot or leg, and then my foot or my leg.

So as an experiment—and I really encourage you, if you're interested, to play with all of these different ways, because for me, they were all very revealing, they were impactful, they changed my understanding of things—as an experiment, and again it can be for a short period of time...

It could be for maybe five minutes or ten minutes of your walking practice. Start noting the movement and the touch in terms of the elements.

So for example, as I was doing this, as I felt the sensations of the forward movement, I noted or framed it in my mind as air element. The feeling of movement, the sensation of movement, is air element. And then as I touched the ground and felt the sensation of hardness, I noted it and held it as earth element.

I just did this for a while. Air element, earth element. And I was connecting those notes, those words, with the actual felt experience of the sensation. It wasn't just words going on in my mind—it was connected to the feeling of movement. This feeling: air element. Touching: earth element.

And it was amazing. Within very few steps, just by doing that and repeating it, the concept of foot or leg, even on the subliminal level, completely fell away. The whole sense of "I'm walking" completely fell away. There was just earth element, air element.

It was so clear and so immediately obvious that the earth element or the air element weren't mine. They didn't belong to me. They weren't self. They were just the basic physical elements, completely non-personal, manifesting their own nature. In those moments: no I, no me, no mine.

As a foretaste, even now, before you make this experiment, consider whether you would ever say "my air element," or "I am the air element." We would never express this experience in that way.

If you practice this—and I have found it so helpful—you can bring it in even outside times of formal walking meditation. You can just be moving about, and particularly in times when there's some mental unease or disturbance of some kind, or even not, just in an ordinary frame of mind, dropping into this way of being with each step frees us from the notion of I, me, mine, of self. Very much, just in the moment, it can extricate us from our stories, where there may be some difficulty or suffering or unease or distress. Most of those situations revolve around a strong notion of I and self.

We use these very simple techniques—not complicated at all. We've talked about how practice is simple but not easy. This practice is simple and easy. So I would really encourage you to do it. Just air element, earth element, air element, earth element. Really having that experience of the non-personal nature of the elements of the body.

Every time we do this, and again it can be for short periods of time, it frees us. It cuts through the power of these three proliferating tendencies.

If you're not quite yet inspired enough to do it, perhaps this will pique your interest even more: this teaching on the elements is precisely the teaching the Buddha gave to Rāhula as a way for Rāhula to free his mind from papañca.

This is what the Buddha said: "Now both the internal and external earth element is simply earth element. And it should be seen as it is with perfect wisdom: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

And then Rāhula asked, "Just the earth element?" The Buddha went on to say, no, this is true of all the elements.

We can have the same benefit that Rāhula received from hearing the words of the Buddha if we take these instructions to heart and actually apply them. You can really see for yourself the power of such a simple exercise.

So again, I would really encourage you to experiment. Experiment with all of these possibilities. Frame the question, again perhaps for short periods of time: What is being known? Seeing things falling away moment after moment.

Being right at the cusp, that edge of the falling away. Like being just at the lip of a waterfall. Or beginning to frame the experience of movement in terms of the elements.

I find that all of these practices serve as a reminder, and it feels really helpful to be reminded of this again and again: the Buddha was not interested in expounding philosophical views. That's not what the teachings were about. He was offering them all as instructions to us for practice. Because these are the practices that liberate our hearts and minds.

We can also see how deeply understanding selflessness or non-self, by cutting through these proliferating tendencies of craving, conceit, and wrong view, expresses itself in the lived experiences of the brahmaviharas. These have been taught in terms of formal meditation practice, but we can also see how the understanding of selflessness brings about quite naturally these beautiful and ennobling qualities of metta, loving-kindness, of compassion, of sympathetic joy, of equanimity, right in the midst of our daily lives. It's not simply limited to a formal meditation practice.

I'd like to give you a few examples of how these really beautiful states of mind manifest when we're not caught up. They manifest naturally when we're not caught up in I-me-mine mind. But first, I'd like to share one story about the arising of metta in a situation in which it was not at first manifesting very strongly.

This goes back many years, to 1974. I had just come back from a long stint in Asia, in India. In the summer of '74, I was teaching at the first summer session of Naropa Institute, which had just formed. There were these big classes with Ram Dass and Trungpa Rinpoche, and I was teaching the meditation sections of Ram Dass's big class. There were a couple of thousand people there. It was kind of like a Buddhist Woodstock—the first gathering of so many people from all over the country who were interested in Eastern philosophy.

Ram Dass was giving teachings on the Bhagavad Gita, Trungpa Rinpoche on the Four Noble Truths. I had known Ram Dass in India, and he had invited me to teach vipassana, to teach mindfulness as part of his big class. I was working really hard. We were having maybe six or seven different classes a day—there were so many people. Naropa had given me a small one-bedroom apartment as faculty housing.

It was that summer that a lot of my friends from India came back to the States. Of course, many of us had no place to live. They didn't have jobs. What should we do? "Let's go visit Joseph in Boulder." They knew I had an apartment. So maybe six or seven of my old India friends showed up on my doorstep and kind of moved in to my apartment, just sleeping on the floor in the living room.

For a while, I was getting a little upset by this. I was tired, I was working hard, and all of these people were crashing in my apartment. This went on for a little bit—I can't remember now how long. But then I started really thinking about it: Why am I getting caught up in this kind of suffering?

When I actually looked and took an interest in the situation, I saw that the reason I was getting a little uptight about all of this was that I was holding very strongly to the notion that it was *my* apartment. It was so revealing, so interesting. As soon as I let go of that particular belief that it was my apartment, then it simply became a shared space in ways that we had done so many times in India. I had shared space with many more than seven people in a room.

It was just so interesting. As soon as I let go of the "I," the "me," the "mine," then all the metta that I had for these dear friends came forth. There was a feeling of generosity and loving-kindness and friendship, and it all came about through letting go of, or coming out of the grip of, the sense of I, the sense of self, the sense of mine.

This happens a lot, and we can see how metta really flourishes in the experience of selflessness.

Compassion is, in a way, metta directed towards beings who are suffering. It is really the hope and the wish: may you be free of suffering.

I think we would all like to be more compassionate, but sometimes it's difficult. It is especially difficult when we're holding on to I, me, and mine. Often we don't like to be with our own pain or discomfort, and at times we don't like to be open to the pain and suffering of others.

I'll share one little story with you. This goes back to my time in Bodh Gaya, in India. For those of you who have been in India, you probably remember that there are lots and lots of wild dogs around in really terrible conditions. They're starving, covered in mange, and nobody's caring for them—very little food.

I remember at different times, in between retreats, I might be walking into the bazaar, the village of Bodh Gaya, to a chai shop just for a cup of chai and maybe some sweets. Often these dogs would be around. It was very interesting for me to observe the range of my responses. There were times when I just didn't want to let it in. I wanted to enjoy a relaxed time, enjoy my chai, enjoy the sweets—just kind of blocking it out.

At other times, I would be going to the tea shop, having the sweets, sitting, and if I was more open and less about I, me, mine—just being there, open to what was all around me in the environment—I could really let the suffering of these poor dogs in

and feel it. The compassion arose so spontaneously. I didn't have to think to be compassionate. When I let go of the self-reference and just was there in an open-hearted way, the suffering was so obvious. And the compassionate response came so effortlessly. It was really beautiful.

So I would just share a little bit of food. Obviously, I wasn't going to solve the problem of all these starving dogs in India. But in the moment, and with those one or two dogs, I could do something. That compassionate response came out of letting go of self-reference, of self-centeredness. It comes quite spontaneously. This is what's so beautiful about how our practice of insight and our gradual understanding of selflessness begins to manifest in these beautiful ways.

Now let me talk a little bit about how selflessness and our experience of it can manifest as mudita, as sympathetic joy, empathetic joy—which really means taking delight, enjoying the happiness of others. What's a little bit surprising is that this, in many ways, might be the most difficult of the four Brahmaviharas. This is an interesting commentary on our condition of really taking delight in other people's happiness.

There's one story I want to share. This is not a personal story, but it's about the French essayist Montaigne. I was reading an article about him and came across something he wrote about a friendship. As he described it, this was a tremendously deep and intimate friendship—not a sexual relationship, just this very intimate and close friendship that was a huge part of his life.

This is what he wrote about this friendship. I find it so striking and so illuminating of a possibility that's really inspiring.

Montaigne wrote: "In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me. I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

I find this quite amazing. It really shows that this quality of taking delight in the happiness of others, this quality of love for another—it's not about me. It's about the other person. "If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence." Just imagine what it would be like if we could hold all our relationships in that way. It's a powerful teaching.

is equanimity. And this is expressed really in what we could call a pith teaching of the Buddha, which points directly to liberation. Each of us can experience it for ourselves, even if it's just for a few minutes at a time.

This is what the Buddha said, this core teaching: "When seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When not clinging, it's not agitated. And when not agitated, it personally realizes Nibbana, the highest peace."

When seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. So that's going back to that exercise of seeing things just falling away, or even in just things being known moment after moment. Seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling—which is not even possible to cling, because we're seeing the change so clearly. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated.

Here again, in these instructions, I wouldn't take it on faith. I would put them into practice and see for yourselves whether it's true. At those times when you are seeing impermanence, when you are right on the cusp of things falling away, see for yourself whether in that moment the mind is clinging or not. And if it's not, really notice the quality of the mind not clinging, because we're right there in the experience of it. And take a look: when the mind is not clinging, is it agitated or not?

We test this for ourselves. What I've found is that, as is always the case so far, the Buddha's instructions seem to pan out. When I look to see when my mind wasn't clinging, yes, the mind is not agitated at this time. And when it's not agitated, we get a taste—and maybe it's a foretaste—of realizing Nibbana, the highest peace. If you remember understanding Nibbana as freedom from greed and hatred and delusion, we could say maybe it's experiencing momentary Nibbana. But we see it; we actually are realizing the truth of this for ourselves.

I'd like to close with these last words of the Buddha. Imagine the scene: the Buddha at the time of his death, what's called his Parinibbana, died at the age of eighty after a lifetime of teaching. He was surrounded by his disciples—nuns and monks, laywomen and laymen. Just imagine the scene. This is a tremendously powerful moment. A great enlightened being, the Buddha, passing away. And this is his very last teaching, his final advice, his final exhortation.

You can imagine that people were sitting there really paying attention. I think we should listen to these words as if we're there, as if the Buddha is giving us this advice and exhorting us in this way, because then it can have a really powerful impact on our path of practice.

"With the light of perfect wisdom, dispel the clouds of ignorance. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Practice with heedfulness."

With the light of perfect wisdom—that is, seeing all things as not mine, not I, not myself—dispel the clouds of ignorance. Subject to decay are all conditioned things.

This is really an important teaching to take in, because the implication of that one line—subject to decay are all conditioned things—is that no conditioned thing is ultimately reliable, is ultimately a refuge, because it's all changing. In understanding that, even as we play in the world and live in the world in the midst of all our daily activities, if we hold this understanding, then we don't get ensnared. We don't get so caught up in it. And we continue to deepen our practice of letting go, of not clinging. The Buddha often talked—the phrase that we find often in the discourses is "liberation through non-clinging." This is our practice.

For all of us, we need to find ways in the midst of our busy lives in the world to remember and put into practice these teachings, because these are the teachings that free the heart. I find it inspiring to remember that people have been practicing this and realizing the fruits of the practice for thousands of years. Reflecting on that, I realize that now it's up to us. We each have to do it for ourselves.

Let's sit for a couple of minutes to let all the words settle, hopefully be absorbed and integrated into your understanding.

With the light of perfect wisdom, dispel the clouds of ignorance. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Practice with heedfulness.

May all beings be at peace.

Thank you all for your kind attention.

---

*This talk was offered during a residential retreat. The schedule reference to "5:30 East Coast time, 2:30 Pacific time" reflects the online format of the retreat during which this teaching was given.*

CHAPTER 66

# Questions & Answers about Papañca 2

Joseph Goldstein · 1h09


*In this Q&A session from a July Insight Meditation Retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses fundamental questions about anattā (non-self) and how identification with consciousness creates the persistent sense of a knower or witness. He offers three approaches for investigating this subtle attachment: the Theravāda understanding of momentary arising consciousness, the passive voice construction of experience 'being known,' and the Zen approach of searching for but not finding the mind. When we look for what is knowing, we discover its unfindability—yet knowing continues, revealing the mystery of selfless awareness.*

*Goldstein clarifies the crucial distinction between wholesome desire as aspiration and unwholesome desire as craving and grasping, using the example of eating when hungry versus overeating. He addresses working with sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), noting both its quality of dullness and its tendency to retreat from difficulties, and offers the judicious mantra 'choose the difficult' for counteracting avoidance patterns.*

*The talk explores practical approaches to working with moods, judgments, and perfectionist tendencies in meditation. Goldstein emphasizes the effortlessness of awareness—demonstrated through simple experiments with seeing and hearing—and recommends shifting from 'watching' language to 'feeling' language in practice. He addresses reactive judgments by distinguishing wise discernment from self-righteous reactivity, citing the Buddha's teaching on maintaining loving-kindness regardless of how others speak to us. The session concludes with recommendations for studying the Pāli Canon, particularly Bhikkhu Bodhi's anthology 'In the Buddha's Words.'*


It's very interesting reading the many questions you sent in. It's interesting because they just touch on so many different and often disparate aspects of the Dharma. So it'll be fun to try to respond to the variety of them.

The first question: "Regarding the self, the sense of self is a hard-earned miracle. I understand seeing through the sense of a solid unchanging separate entity, but why do we say there is no self? What does Buddhism consider this essence to be?"

And then there was another related one: "I understand your point about there not being a non-changing ultimate self, or us not being our thoughts or emotions, but what about the strong sense of self that although we can't really point to, we just instinctively feel? Is this feeling of self based in delusion, or is there some kind of self that we just don't fully understand?"

And the last one in this category: "You talk about conceit and wrong view in describing a feeling of and a belief in self. But don't you agree that something is happening to something in this world? When we experience a witness in mindfulness, even though that witness seems not to have qualities or cravings, isn't that a something that things are appearing to?"

So this question of non-self. The last holdout really of the sense of self is our usually unconscious and deeply habituated identification with knowing. Because even as we can see that the body is changing—the different elements and bodily sensations and thoughts and feelings and emotions—we can see relatively easily that that's all in a process of change. But still we have the belief or the felt sense of, "Well, I'm the one knowing it all," right? So in that identification with knowing, we're creating the sense of a witness or an observer.

The challenge then is how do we cut through this very subtle and hard to see identification with consciousness itself—the identification with knowing so that it creates a knower?

I want to offer a few different approaches to investigating this issue, ways of possibly beginning to cut through or to see through this identification with the knowing or with consciousness.

The first way has to do with how this process is understood in the Theravada teachings. And I'm going to talk about a few different ways of cutting through with other traditions as well. But in the Theravada way of understanding this whole process—this mind-body process—what we're calling self is the pairwise progression, moment after moment, of knowing an object. Knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. And the objects can be any one of the six basic elements I spoke of the other day: knowing a sight, knowing a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, knowing some mind experience.

Consciousness is actually arising anew with each moment, with each new object of awareness. It's not the same consciousness that is carried through. There's one discourse in the texts where the Buddha was very explicit about just this point—that consciousness itself is arising and passing in each moment.

In the course of vipassanā practice, as the mind settles and we become a bit more concentrated and go through various perspectives, and we could say stages of understanding, there's a stage—and this is not a super advanced stage; it comes just sort of in the beginning of our practice once the mind has settled down a bit—we begin to have the experience of this pairwise progression: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

At a certain point, once we see that, that is really the first real glimpse of selflessness. And it's interesting that this stage of understanding is called "purification of view." So it's just the beginning. It's the beginning of our understanding of it, but we're beginning to see or have an understanding of the basic framework of how our life is unfolding. It's just these moments: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, arising and passing.

As the practice continues, at a certain point, we also begin to emphasize—and this just happens naturally, it's not a decision—we begin to see more the disappearing aspect of objects. So rather than just seeing everything arising, arising, arising, we're seeing the falling away, falling away, falling away of this pairwise progression. And so then we're really seeing the dissolution of consciousness itself moment after moment.

This is a powerful cutting through the identification with consciousness as being self, as being "I." And so it's no longer a knower, but simply knowing. No witness, but rather witnessing.

So this is one way that we cut through this identification with knowing. Another way, and this is something I mentioned in the last couple of days, is using the passive voice construction—things being known. And this can be done in a very simple way. You know, just going for a walk and feeling the sensations of movement or the sensations of touch. They're just being known, being known, being known. Through that linguistic frame of reference, changing our usual way instead of "I'm knowing" to just "things being known," we're taking the self out of the process. And we have the direct experience of it.

If, at a certain point, you get comfortable in that mode, even for relatively short periods of time, and just settle into that frame of things being known and experiencing them in that way, then it's a very interesting question: known by what? So that's a kind of turning the mind back onto the knowing itself, trying to really get an understanding of the nature of this knowing mind. The passive voice construction is another way of cutting through the identification with consciousness.

The third way I'll mention really comes from the Zen tradition. There's this Zen story of Bodhidharma, who was an Indian adept who brought the teachings to China. Out of his teachings, the whole tradition of Chan and later Zen developed. So a seeker came to Bodhidharma and said, "I'm suffering so much. My mind is in such distress. Can you please help me?" And Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind and I'll help you." And the seeker says, "I've looked for it everywhere and I can't find it." And then Bodhidharma says, "There, it's already pacified."

This is more than just a clever Zen story. This is pointing to a direct way for us to investigate. It goes back to the question: things being known, known by what? And then when we look back, we see there's nothing to find—and yet the knowing is happening. So that's the great mystery of consciousness, and another way of understanding the selflessness of knowing is this quality of its unfindability.

One way to experiment and investigate this for yourself—and sometimes I just play with this in my own practice—I'll be sitting and maybe sounds are arising, and the sounds are being known. And then I'll ask the question in my mind: can I find what's knowing the sound? Can I find it? And then I'll look, I'll look to see, and realize I can't find it—and yet the knowing is happening. So that's the great mystery of this whole process, how the knowing is going along without a knower, without being identified with it.

This is important, and it addresses that question of how, even when we notice that so much of our experience is changing and passing away, we still carry this felt sense of someone here. I think it really has to do with this process of being identified with the knowing. That identification is creating the sense of someone there, of a knower. So I just encourage you to explore and investigate this in some of the ways I mentioned.

Okay. Regarding desire: "Are you saying that desire is the same thing as craving or clinging? Would you say that without some kind of wholesome desire, there may not be a Buddha? Is there a desire, a life force that is the fuel for our spiritual seeking so there's no more need to seek?"

This question comes up quite a lot because the word desire in English has so many different meanings. If we're not clearly defining which meaning we're employing, it can get confusing. One meaning of desire could be an aspiration—an aspiration for enlightenment, for awakening, to be more compassionate. Or it could be a desire just to fulfill basic needs, a desire to eat when we're hungry. Desire in these examples is not involved with greed. It's not involved with clinging. But another meaning of desire is associated with greed, with clinging and grasping.

Just as an example of how you might experientially distinguish the two—and this is something that I'm sure will be very familiar to all of us—when you're hungry, there's a desire for food. That's just a natural phenomenon. It's appropriate to eat. But then when we're full, when we've really eaten the appropriate amount, we're nourished, our bodies and lives are sustained...

And then we want more. "Oh, that was delicious. Let me have more." And we overeat, we overindulge. So that's the desire of greed. That's the desire of clinging, the desire of grasping. Two very different mind states, even though we're using the same word.

So I would just check: when we say "I have a desire for something," check to see whether it falls on the wholesome side of things—an aspiration for something beneficial, either as a natural process like sustaining our body with food, or along the spiritual path, a desire to become more loving, more compassionate—or whether the desire carries that greedy quality of mind. It's not that hard to see the difference.

*Question: When you mentioned that there can be a state of tranquility, is there a way to realize that it is tranquility and not sloth and torpor?*

I really appreciated that question because it gives me a chance to talk more about sloth and torpor. There is a way of distinguishing calm from sloth and torpor. With sloth and torpor, it's usually associated with sleepiness and a quality of dullness in the mind—where things are not clear, dull, and maybe we're nodding off a bit. Whereas calm or tranquility is very clear. When the mind is calm, there's clarity. Calm is actually one of the factors of enlightenment, and I think in our practice it's an underappreciated quality, something to develop. Calm provides a quality of ease in mind and body that allows us to see clearly.

So you want to really examine: Is there dullness in the mind? Sleepiness? Or is it tranquil and peaceful with clarity?

But here it can get interesting, because there's actually a connection between calm and sloth and torpor, which I found really useful in working with sleepiness. I'm sure you've heard the many remedies—opening the eyes, standing up, putting water on one's face. But one thing I began to notice is that within a state of dullness or sleepiness, there is a thread of calm. When the mind is sleepy, it's not restless. Calm is the opposite of restlessness.

So even within sleepiness, where that's the predominant state, I found that if there's enough energy to be interested and to investigate, it's possible to find the quality of calm within it and then focus on that. It's like pulling the thread of calm out of the sloth and torpor and really energizing that particular thread. That would be an interesting way to practice when sloth and torpor is present.

And also, when the mind is generally in a tranquil state, acknowledge that and understand this is a wholesome state of mind. It's a factor of enlightenment. You want to cultivate it—not get attached to it—but it is something to develop.

Now there's one other aspect of sloth and torpor I want to mention because it's not usually talked about this way, but I found it highlighted an arena very applicable in my practice. Another meaning of sloth and torpor, aside from sleepiness and dullness, is that quality of mind which retreats from difficulties. In the face of difficulty, we just retreat. We don't want to deal with it. We don't have the energy to deal with it.

I found this very illuminating. When I recognized that this was also an aspect of sloth and torpor, then when I found myself pulling back from engaging with difficulties—whether difficult physical sensations or difficult mind states—I'm sure you're familiar with the feeling: "I just don't want to deal with this," and pulling back, not engaging. It was helpful to recognize, "Oh, that's sloth and torpor. That's the working of those mind states." Just recognizing that inspired me to make more effort, to bring more energy.

At times I found one mantra particularly helpful, though it has to be used judiciously because it's not always appropriate. My mantra in these situations was: *choose the difficult*. Because my general inclination, both in meditation and in life, is to choose the easy. I noticed that pattern in myself. But there are times when choosing the difficult is actually what raises energy and enables us to engage in a really productive and fruitful way with whatever experience is in front of us.

So you might see for yourself at those times—either because of an inclination toward the easeful, or a certain sense of laziness, or sloth and torpor retreating from difficulty—you might try out this mantra: "Choose the difficult." Go for it. See what happens.

Of course, if one is over-striving, getting uptight or whatever, then "choose the difficult" is not the right approach. That's when we need to relax and settle back. But it can be used in a judicious way.

In a previous session, moods were mentioned—specifically, like waking up on the wrong side of the bed. There's also non-clinical depression in others. It's like the brain is telling the mind, "You think you're in charge? Guess again." Is there any way to work with these moods?

This is a really interesting question. There is a psychologist, Paul Ekman, who made an interesting distinction between moods and emotions. He said that emotions are like singular events, usually quite strong, and we usually know the cause of them. We feel angry or we feel excited or something like that. The emotion is clear, it's strong, and we can often trace back the cause for that emotion to arise.

Moods are much more subtle, much more diffuse. It's like in the question—waking up on the wrong side of the bed. We don't quite know why we're in a down mood. We don't necessarily know the causes, but it's just a kind of background pervasive feeling. This can be challenging to work with, so I want to suggest a few ways.

First, I had a very humorous experience. At one time I was on retreat—this is in terms of whether we can recognize the causes of our mood or not. Sometimes we miss, a big miss. So I was on retreat, just doing walking meditation and feeling world weariness. The world felt so heavy, and I felt weighed down and burdened by it. This was not how I usually feel, so it was quite striking to me. I began interpreting it as, "Oh, this must really be an insight into dukkha, into the First Noble Truth, just the pervasiveness of the unsatisfying nature of things. Maybe this is a deepening insight." I was walking and feeling this way and reflecting on it in this way, and then after a few minutes I burped, and the whole mood dissipated. So all my big understanding of world weariness and the truth of dukkha was a bit misplaced.

This is just by way of saying we often don't know exactly the causes of why we feel we're in some mood. But regardless of whether we do or don't know, the question is: how can we become mindful of them? So we're not lost, we're not caught up, we're not identified, we're not drowning in our moods.

First, it's to understand that they're not clearly defined objects. They're not like a sensation or a sound or even a thought or strong emotion, which we can recognize pretty easily. Not that we always do, but they're usually pretty well defined. A mood is much more amorphous. There's a gossamer quality to it. So we have to employ our mindfulness in a very particular way.

It's not like strongly directing the mind towards the object, because we'll probably just direct it right through it. There's nothing substantial enough to work with in that way. What I've found helpful when there's some kind of mood—or even simply as a way of checking to see if there's some mood going on, perhaps very subtle, not even aware of—is more a settling back. Becoming very receptive, very open, letting whatever's there in. We're not narrowing our attention onto some specific object.

We're just settling back, opening up, and getting a feel for it—simply being receptive in that way. And then very often we can come to an awareness of what it is that we're feeling. In that awareness, being mindful of it—mindfulness meaning, again as a reminder, that we're aware of it without identifying with it, without claiming it as being our own. Rather, we recognize that the mood arose out of conditions, whatever the conditions may have been, even if we're not aware of them. It's another passing state.

So we can be receptive. It's very soft—a very soft quality that's needed to become aware of moods. But it's very helpful to do, because if we're not mindful of them, it's like they become the filter through which we're looking at all of our experience. It's like putting on a pair of colored glasses and not even realizing we're seeing the world through those particular lenses. When moods are there and we're not aware of them, not mindful, they are really conditioning our experience and our perception of the world. So this is an important, somewhat subtle aspect of our practice and mindfulness. And as I just mentioned, even if we're not aware that a particular mood is present, I find it helpful just periodically to check in. You know, just going along and asking, "Oh, is there some mood present? Am I feeling something?" And that sometimes can reveal something that's going on that we weren't even aware of.

The last thing I want to say about working with moods—and what I'm about to say is applicable to everything, but specifically with moods because often we forget to do it—especially with a strong one, where we're feeling down in some way, or frustrated, or there's some mind state that's really influencing our experience. In doing and practicing, trying to be mindful in the ways I just suggested, it's also important to remember that it's going to pass. Because we can get so enmeshed in our stories of things, so caught up and identified with how we're feeling. Even though we know better, there's often the feeling that this is going to last forever. Intellectually, we know that's not true, but we're often burdened in the experience of it, and it somehow feels that way.

So it's very helpful, as it just gives us perspective, which allows us—especially if it's some kind of unpleasant mood or experience—to be with it with greater ease, knowing this is going to pass. And it's going to probably pass much more quickly than we think. This is an aside, and I don't remember whether I mentioned it in this course because it's one of my favorite reflections that I talk about often. But whenever I'm caught up in some difficulty or conflict, some kind of suffering, I like to change my time reference. Instead of being so caught up in what's happening right now, when I'm feeling stuck and caught, I just remind myself to take more of a historical perspective.

Just one example of this: quite a few years ago, I read this biography of Genghis Khan. He was thirteenth century, something like that. He ruled a vast empire—most of Asia, and I think even perhaps some of Europe. He was the big man in those days. So I'd like to ask you a question: How many of you today thought of Genghis Khan? Probably unless you were reading the book, you probably have not been thinking of him, right? So here's this figure who was a world figure, a world-dominating figure. But in the long sweep of history, Genghis Khan had all this influence and then passed away. If that's true of somebody like that—and you know it's true of everything—when I put my own particular situation, whatever it might be, into that context, I realize it's not even going to take four centuries to have this recede. It may take a few days or weeks, but it happens. It weakens or loosens the intensity of the dukkha and involvement in it. So I just offer that because it's been very helpful for me—just bringing in this time perspective as a reminder of the truth of change.

A question came in: "How do you work with perfectionist tendencies in this practice? My lifelong habit of wanting to do this perfectly or right shows up in my body and mind during practice as tightness, gripping, laser focus instead of soft focus, et cetera. It's been hard to stay motivated to practice because the approach itself is so unpleasant."

This is really important. How we practice will very much influence, as the question indicated, the quality of our experience. This perfectionist quality of mind obviously involves a lot of grasping and wanting a certain outcome, wanting it to be a certain way. If this is a strong tendency, strongly conditioned for whatever reason, there are ways of countering it. So I'll just mention a few. It's a gradual deconditioning of that kind of grasping approach to practice, that wanting it to be perfect. There's a way of gradually deconditioning that habit and coming to practice in a more open, relaxed way.

One approach might be, in the beginning of each sitting—and maybe for some time, perhaps for the first five minutes, or even the first ten minutes—just practice hearing meditation. Simply sitting and listening to whatever sounds may be coming.

You're not looking for any particular sound—you're just sitting, and whatever sounds happen to appear, you receive them. It may be loud, very particular sounds. It may be some kind of background sound. It may just be the ambient sounds in the room. Maybe it's the sound of silence, where there's no particular sound, but you're tuning in, hearing the silence.

For most people, hearing is very effortless. Sounds arise and we don't have to make an effort to hear. So if we just start with hearing, it's really a way of settling into letting the mind become very open, very spacious. It's like sitting in space, and the sounds are

appearing in the space. Hopefully you get a sense of the easefulness of awareness—that we don't have to be making this intense effort to be aware. Basically, we just have to remember. Can I just sit here and know what's happening?

This ties in to the whole discussion on the passive voice framework. We're just sitting, sounds being known. That's all. Sounds being known.

Let me offer a little hands-on experiment illustrating the easefulness of using this passive voice. If you're willing, simply move your arm and feel it moving. It's just moving and you're feeling it moving. That's all. You're feeling the movement, and as you're feeling the movement, it's just being known. Does that take any effort at all? No, you're just feeling it and it's being known. It's quite effortless.

You might practice doing things like this, or in walking meditation. Instead of the sense of "I've got to be perfect in it," it's just taking a step and feeling it.

One change of language, which reflects what I've just been talking about, and I may have mentioned this on the first day: so much of meditative language that we use is watching language—watch, notice, observe. When we use that language to describe our practice, it can sometimes be problematic because it implies a kind of tracking of experience. Moving the arm and I have to track it, right? Using that observing language might be contributing to this whole sense of "I have to do it perfectly."

If you change the language from observing or noticing to feeling language—you're just moving the arm and feeling it—that makes all the difference. The feeling is from the inside. It's not like we're up here trying to keep track. It's just feeling it. It's like doing yoga or tai chi—so simple. You're just feeling the movement. In that, there's nothing to perfect. It's already here.

One other example of this: Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks about this a lot when he's emphasizing the effortlessness of awareness. I think it's an important reminder. He says, if you sit for a moment with your eyes closed and then you open your eyes—does it take any effort to see? I don't think so. The seeing just happens. We open our eyes and we're seeing, we're aware. This highlights the fact that the capacity for awareness is already here. It's more a question of just remembering, so we don't get caught up in extraneous patterns of our meditation practice.

I remember one time I was on retreat and I found myself caught in the striving mode. I just had some idea of real goal orientation. Having a goal is fine as an aspiration, but as an expectation, it can become very problematic. When I saw that I was

striving in some unwholesome way, I used a phrase that reminded me of what I just was talking about in terms of the effortlessness of seeing or hearing. The phrase I used was actually two different phrases. One was: already aware.

Already aware or already here. I don't have to get someplace else. It's already here. And just reminding myself of that, it totally cut through that striving mode. I was just back, aware of what was arising in the moment.

So these are just different ways of beginning to decondition this perfectionist conditioning, this striving and wanting, and reminding oneself in this variety of ways that we can be receptive and more relaxed and trust that awareness will be there.

Here is an interesting question: Can you talk about how to remove the personal nature or conceit when judgments about others arise? For example, a friend sent me a photo of her and her four kids on an airplane, not wearing masks. I instantly felt judgmental, angry, and fearful. How can I remove the "I" in that type of experience?

This is an important question because the judging mind is so common. I see it in myself a lot, and I've been working with so many meditators over all these years. It just comes up again and again—how the mind can so easily drop into this reactive judgment.

First, I'd like to speak about working with judgment in general, and then talk more specifically about that particular example.

I've developed a few techniques in working with the judging mind. One is this: when this pattern was running rampant at a particular time, I just started counting the judgments. Every time I became aware of a judgment in my mind—judgment one, judgment two, judgment fifty-six, judgment five hundred and ninety-eight, judgment three thousand. And it was kind of interesting to see how high a number I got to.

But what happened, just by doing that simple exercise of counting the judgments, was that at a certain point I just started to smile. Because it was obviously so ridiculous. It was just one of these ridiculous patterns of mind that we get caught in. And by the time I reached some rather high number, the ridiculousness of it became so apparent that I just started smiling.

This is the key to freeing ourselves from being so caught by the judging mind: not taking them seriously. Really seeing them as just empty thoughts in the mind coming and going. So it's a question of not believing them, but also not having aversion to them.

Because if we have aversion to the judgment, that also strengthens them. That's feeding them. It's actually giving it an importance which, in its essential nature, it doesn't have. It's just another empty thought coming and going.

Having a sense of humor about one's mind and the crazy things it often does—a sense of humor is so helpful in terms of just lightening up about it all. It frees us from a lot of our reactivity.

Another technique that was very instructive, and relates somewhat to the specific question, comes from a retreat I was on at IMS many years ago. I remember walking into the dining room and having a judgment, a comment, about almost everybody in the room. Judgment about what they were wearing or how fast or slow they were moving, how much food they were taking. Again, totally ridiculous, but that's what the mind was doing.

At a certain point I just became interested. Why is this happening? And I realized that all of these judgments had their root, their source, in the fact that I was seeing unmindfully. I would come into the dining room and I was seeing all these different people, but not mindful that I was seeing. And therefore it just triggered this whole train.

So then I started noting "seeing." As soon as I would walk into the dining room—seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing—all the way to getting my food, sitting down at the table. It was amazing. By being mindful of that sense contact right at the sense base, by being mindful rather than unmindful, ninety-nine percent of the judgments were gone.

That was really interesting—seeing, okay, what's the underlying cause of the pattern?

Now, with this particular question, when there's a judgment that involves strong reactivity, so this person saw this picture and it triggered anger and fear and different emotions and they got caught up in them—when there's that strong reactivity in the mind, even after one has noticed, "Oh yes, this was a judgment," but then we're really reactive, it's really helpful to investigate the nature of that reaction and our relationship to it.

Because there is a difference between discernment and reactivity. We might have seen that picture of the woman and the children on the plane without masks, and that could have been discernment.

Oh, that's not skillful, you know, and that would be a wise discernment, but that would be free of that anger or the fear or whatever the emotion was.

So when the reactivity is there, then that becomes our responsibility—that no longer has anything to do with what that woman and her children were doing on the plane. If we're caught in a strong reactivity, which is different than simple discernment and wisdom, that reactivity is up to us to explore and understand.

So one of the things, and I think this was an example perhaps, but it certainly is generally applicable: Why do we get so caught up in angry judgments or angry reactions? The Buddha had a very incisive little phrase. He said, "Anger with its poison source and honeyed tip." There's something very seductive about this feeling of anger in so many situations. And it very often is tied to the sense of being right. There's often this quality of self-righteousness in the anger. "Well, I'm right." And it's the dubious pleasure of being right, that honeyed tip. And we miss the poison source of it—the anger itself, which is a state of suffering.

We could justify it to ourselves in all kinds of ways. "Oh, I should be angry," that feeling of self-righteousness. But meanwhile, we are the ones who are suffering. So again, wise discernment does not require self-righteousness. It doesn't require attachment to being right. And yet, those are the feelings that very often solidify this reactivity, and we're caught by that.

I want to read something related to this in terms of reactivity. This is a teaching from the Buddha, and it had to do more with when we're reactive to how people are speaking to us, but it could relate to any way that people are impacting us and we have this strong reactivity. I'll just preface it by saying this is a very high bar that the Buddha is laying out, but I find it very inspiring because it points to a direction and can become an aspiration for us to practice.

This is what he said: "There are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you. Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or with harm, spoken with a mind of loving kindness or with a mind of inner hate." So these are all the ways people might address us. "Here you should train yourself thus: Our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind and heart of loving kindness."

Just imagine the situation. Somebody's lying to you and speaking angrily and harshly and all of that, and the Buddha is saying our minds, we should train ourselves, our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words, abide compassionate for their welfare with a heart of loving kindness.

So again, it's pointing to this very important basic Dharma principle: how we feel and how we relate to others, even more importantly, that's totally up to us. If we can at times, even in the moment of having unpleasant things come at us—whether it's through words or through seeing something that we think is wrong—if right in the moment we can remember this and again be in this space of discernment rather than reactivity, that would be great. Then it would be easier to maybe find that place of compassion.

But even after this—that would be an advanced practice—but even if we find ourselves having become reactive, if we remember this as a teaching and as a training rather than just stew in our own reactivity, attached to being right, having that be the cause of our stuckness—if we can remember this teaching and say, "No, I can free my heart from this. I can free my mind from this," and we go to the place, even retroactively, of clear discernment, then our hearts are at ease. And in fact, our response, if there's some response possible, will be much more skillful.

There were quite a few more questions, but just as the last one, because the schedule is a little different today—I remember the question. There was somebody who was interested in exploring the classical texts but didn't know even where to begin, because there are so many. I mean, there are many, many volumes of the Buddhist teachings. We'll put this on the resource page also.

But one place to start, I think, would be a book by Bhikkhu Bodhi called *In the Buddha's Words*. It's an anthology of teachings from the Pali Canon. Bhikkhu Bodhi is a wonderful translator of the texts, and really, reading anything he's written—he writes very clearly. His translations are very clear, and his own exposition of the texts is very clear. So I would really recommend that you look for things he's written. And this book in particular, in terms of reading the texts themselves, is a very good anthology.

Just a word about the value of study. Our practice, our own meditation practice and experience, is always limited. We have limited experience. And by studying the Buddha's teachings, it really is a chance to enlarge our understanding. If we read, as I've been talking about over these days, if we take the teachings and read them as instructions to us, sometimes we'll just come across one phrase or one particular teaching that really speaks to us. And we can then put it into practice, take it as an instruction.

For me, this has been such a valuable way of deepening my understanding of the depth and breadth of the Buddhist teachings. And it has really been transformative. For those of you who might be interested in exploring this, I would highly recommend it.

Well, it's really been great. Even though we're doing this virtually, it's been a pleasure to be with you all.

Let's just sit for a minute or two and let it all settle.

May all beings be at peace.

CHAPTER 67

# Questions and Responses

Joseph Goldstein · 1h05

> *In this intimate Q&A session—Joseph Goldstein's first gathering with yogis since the COVID closure—he addresses fundamental questions about the meditative path with characteristic depth and accessibility. The talk centers on a transformative insight from his own practice: the profound recognition that "whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, therefore there's nothing to want." This understanding, drawn from the suttas, illuminates how the essence of practice is non-craving rather than striving for particular experiences.*
>
> *Goldstein explores the Buddha's teaching on right effort through the classical simile of tuning a lute, offering practical guidance for those who tend toward over-efforting. He discusses the wholesome and unwholesome dimensions of anger, the nature of consciousness as arising and passing at the six sense doors, and provides a lucid explanation of anattā (non-self) through the metaphor of a river—self being merely a designation for the flow of changing phenomena, not a thing in itself.*
>
> *The session includes reflections on aging and practice, emphasizing that we can be mindful of anything—including confusion, illness, or diminishment. Goldstein shares how reading Father Gregory Boyle's "Tattoos on the Heart" transformed his understanding of inclusiveness through the principle of "love no matter what," offering a powerful teaching on how to remain open-hearted even amid conflict and difference. Throughout, he weaves together the Four Noble Truths, the investigation of dhammas, and practical wisdom for both formal meditation and daily life.*

It's really nice to be with you all, masks and all. This is my first time in the hall with yogis since we closed for COVID, so it's kind of exciting.

There were a lot of questions, and it's doubtful that we'll get through all of them. There were a few which were similar, so I thought I would just read them together.

"For someone with a tendency to over-effort, being simple and easy can be not simple and easy. Any tips?" "How does one stop thinking about the end of the river and put their paddle down? In other words, how do you stop making so much effort?" "Do you have any advice for how to relax into and trust the unfolding of the process?"

These are not uncommon questions. And as I'm sure most of you know, the Buddha gave a lot of emphasis to exploring exactly what right effort means. You're probably familiar with the example he gave of tuning the strings of a lute. If it's too tight, you have

to relax. Too loose, you have to tighten the strings a bit. So this is an ongoing adjustment that we all make in our practice in monitoring the quality of our effort. And it's not like we find the right balance and then we have it. We'll find ourselves going through cycles where we were over-efforting or we were just too relaxed and spacing out.

Most of these questions were more on the side of what to do when we're making too much effort—what I call "efforting," or struggling in the practice. This actually points to a deep understanding of what the practice is about, which we often forget. And it's highlighted in one line that is found often in the suttas, in the discourses. It's a line that in the discourses, when people would hear it, they'd often get enlightened. Or sometimes they said that line is an expression of their enlightenment. So this is your big chance. Listen carefully. It's so simple that people really miss it.

*Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.*

I had read that a million times, and it just seemed like an obvious statement of impermanence. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. But a couple of years ago I was on retreat, doing a self-retreat, and that line came into my mind. Because I was on retreat, rather than just reading it in a book, it landed very differently. Instead of being an intellectual appreciation of "oh yeah, everything's impermanent," it kind of settled right into the midst of my unfolding meditative process. I was on retreat, I was sitting intensively, that thought came—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—and so I actually applied that understanding in that moment.

Of course it's not hard to comprehend that. It's easy to understand and it's even easy to apply if we remember. But then my mind did something really interesting which had quite a profound effect on my practice.

So I'm sitting. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And then my mind went to: therefore there's nothing to want.

I'm talking now within the meditative process. Because if whatever arises is also going to pass away, therefore there's nothing to want. Whatever it is that I might be wanting in my practice will also pass away.

And it was really interesting what happened in that moment with "nothing to want." I could feel my mind drop back from what is a very common leaning into the process. This is really common. I see it in myself and with many, many yogis. We're with this moment *in order to* get to the next moment. It could be something as simple as the in-breath in order to take the out-breath. Or it could be with the breath in order to get concentrated. Some kind of "in order to," some leaning into.

And then in that moment—there's nothing to want—the mind dropped back from any leanings. It was so vivid and not complicated. It was just this very simple little thing.

And then I reflected a little bit that right there is the essence of the practice. And this is what I think, for myself and many people, we miss. The essence of the practice is non-craving.

When you consider the Four Noble Truths—the truth of dukkha, the cause of dukkha is craving, the end of dukkha is the end of craving, and the path—right in that moment of "there's nothing to want," you feel the mind drop back from wanting. Right there we have a taste, even if it's just momentary, of the Third Noble Truth. We've experienced, to some extent, but a profound extent, a touching of the liberative potential of the mind, which the Buddha pointed to: the end of craving.

I just find it interesting that even for experienced practitioners—and I see this in myself and, as I say, with many others—we're often practicing *for* some experience rather than for not craving. Do you see the difference? That's where we can get caught up in this over-efforting. If we have some idea of reaching for an experience, wanting our meditation to be or to have a certain quality, that's a wanting in the mind. It's a craving in the mind. When there's nothing to want, there's no craving, and the mind is really at peace.

So one thing you might try, if this resonates with you at all: when you're in your practice and you feel like you're in somewhat of a flow of experience, see what happens if you simply call to mind, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want." But not as an intellectual exercise—actually applying it in your practice at that time. Then notice whether you can feel what I'm describing as that dropping back rather than leaning into. It really changed my practice a lot because it was such a powerful reminder of what the essence of the practice is. The end of craving—that's what we're practicing.

I'll say one more thing about over-efforting that just came to mind. I'm not sure, because I haven't been here to hear the instructions, so you may have heard this already. But even in just being with the breath, just a simple basic being with the breath, notice the difference between when your mind is zeroing in on the breath and when you're feeling the breath within the whole body.

I've been teaching—and maybe some of you have heard me give the instruction—of just using the phrase "there is a body" as a larger framework. We settle ourselves within that larger framework. There is a body. And then there's simply being with what

arises within that larger framework without narrowing the focus. Now, there can be times when the narrowing of the focus is useful and helpful. But particularly if there's over-efforting, there's a tendency to do that more when you're zeroing in on the breath, as opposed to just allowing the breath to find its own rhythm because we're not interfering with it—because we've given ourselves a broader, larger context, namely the whole body. Is this clear?

That also made a huge difference when I started practicing in that way, and I've gotten a lot of feedback from yogis who found it helpful.

This is an interesting question: Can there be anger without ill will or aversion? In other words, can anger ever be wholesome?

There are two levels to this question, I think. First is to understand what's behind the question. Very often, anger may arise in response to injustice or something that we think is wrong. Our response, the anger, may arise as a reaction to that. In that situation, I think it's helpful to see the anger as a messenger. That emotion arising is actually giving us a message: "This is not right." But that's the point at which we can either get lost in the anger, identified with it, and maybe vent it—which is not skillful—or understand that the emotion is arising as a message in response to a certain situation.

And if we can understand the message and let go of the anger, then our minds have a greater possibility of actually addressing the situation with more skill. If we're just caught up in our own reactivity, that's generally not the most skillful way of dealing with the situation or trying to address it.

In contexts like this, I think it's useful to see the anger as an emotion telling us something, and then we learn from it. That's a helpful way of understanding anger and the potential to transform it into something that is really effective.

Another question arose—and I had this discussion with Bhikkhu Anālayo on a walk because it's come up before. I asked him whether, in that context, we could think of anger as not being unwholesome. He responded in a way that reflected the classical Buddhist teachings: anger is always unwholesome, always unskillful.

For me, I think it's possible to hold both of these perspectives. I don't think we have to choose. We can understand, based on the Buddha's teachings, that anger is always unwholesome—and there's a little footnote to this also. At the same time, until we are free of anger at the third stage of enlightenment, it's going to arise at different times. So even if we know that fundamentally it's an unwholesome mind state, if we realize it is going to arise, can we understand it in a way that we are using it skillfully?

Do you see the possibility? I don't think the two perspectives have to be in opposition. One has to do with recognizing that this is an emotion that will arise in certain circumstances—how can I use it most skillfully and understand it most skillfully? At the same time, we can realize that at a certain level of enlightenment, it's not going to arise anymore, and there will be other motivations for taking skillful action. That's how I understand it.

Now, the footnote. One of the problems in communication is that people can use the same word to mean different things. Unless there's a lot of clarity about what a person means by the words they use, there's often just a missing.

As an example, one understanding of anger would include the intent to do harm. We see that certainly in many manifestations of anger—there is that intention to do harm. That to me is clearly unskillful. But then the question arises: is there some emotion that looks like anger but does not contain that energy to do harm? Something more like righteous indignation, perhaps—some other word.

This would take a very careful examination of our own minds when something is arising that we're calling anger, to really investigate. Understanding that the classical teachings use that word and say it's one of the unwholesome roots, that could actually be a motivation for us when what we're calling anger is arising to really look at that mind state, to investigate for ourselves. What's involved in this? Certainly one aspect would be the doing of harm—that would be a clear signal to me that it's unskillful. But maybe there are gradations. This is just an invitation to investigate.

As I said, there are ways to understand that even if anger is unskillful at all levels, the fact that it will still be arising means we need to ask: how can we use it skillfully and not erupt in flames?

This is important because anger that motivates doing harm is a source of a huge amount of suffering in the world. Years ago—and I was just reminded of it recently—when I would talk about sīla and the precepts, I would make the suggestion: What would it be like if everybody in the world undertook just one precept? Not to kill. Even not to kill just human beings. That's all. This world would be an incredibly different place.

The intention to do harm does harm. And so we want to watch in our own minds. Hopefully you don't have intentions to go around killing people, but we can do harm in a lot of different ways. That's something to watch for.

Some of these were similar questions: How can we explore the arising and passing away of phenomena in our sitting and walking practice? How do you know if you're in the territory of seeing the arising and passing beyond the conceptual level?

There are different levels of seeing arising and passing. There can be a very clear seeing of it for short periods of time. But that phrase, "seeing arising and passing," also refers to a stage in the progress of insight, in the unfolding of the practice, where the mindfulness and concentration really have developed to quite a good extent. The momentum of our noticing becomes very strong, very high, and there's just this tremendous clarity and lightness. The mind is luminous at that time, where we're simply in that flow of seeing the rapid rising and passing of phenomena really effortlessly because there's so much momentum. That's the classical description of the stage of insight of arising and passing away.

But I've found a way of really glimpsing that deeply, even before that stage, where we may not have built up that really powerful momentum where we're just in the flow of it. We can bring the wisdom mind—in the factors of enlightenment, the wisdom aspect is called investigation of dhammas. It's that investigative mind. This quality is very strong in my mind, sometimes to my detriment. I've been told by certain teachers, especially when I was trying to do concentration practice, "Oh, you have too much investigation." I was always investigating instead of just staying right on the object. But at other times, it's really served me, because I've discovered a lot in very ordinary circumstances.

One way of really seeing clearly the pretty rapid arising and passing of phenomena is to take a few minutes—it can be sitting, it can be in formal walking meditation, or it could be just going for a walk, or moving about the building—holding a very simple question in mind. And that is: moment after moment, what is being known? That's all. Just what's being known.

In whatever we're doing, we're paying attention, we're settled back, we're not directing the mind in any way at all. It's very receptive, very open, and we're just in this very receptive mode, noticing what is being known moment after moment. And because we're not doing anything, it's not at all difficult to become aware of a sensation, a sound, the feeling of the air on one's face, a thought, a movement—just moment after moment something is going to be arising. If we're holding that intention to acknowledge what's being known, moment after moment, you will see that these objects are coming and going very quickly by themselves.

It's not like we have to do anything to make things change. The very nature of phenomena: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And when we're settled back, not trying to direct anything, it becomes very clear, very obvious. And effortless. It's really an easeful thing to do.

What I would suggest is, if this suggestion is of interest to you, to do it just for five minutes at a time, ten minutes at a time. Because if you think, "Oh, I'm going to do that for an hour," the mind's going to lose energy. It's going to get bored. You're not going to be able to do it, really. But for five minutes or ten minutes, there can be the energy behind that investigation, which I think will really spur your interest. And you will see. You will have a direct experience of arising and passing of phenomena.

This exercise has another benefit, and this goes to a deeper way of understanding selflessness, of non-self, which for many people is the hardest of the three characteristics. We can understand impermanence easily. We can understand dukkha pretty easily. But non-self is counterintuitive. There's an intimate connection between insight into impermanence and non-self. When we're really seeing the impermanence in a somewhat sustained way, even for short periods of time, nothing lasts long enough to be self. And so we actually have a felt sense of selflessness in the exercise I just described. What's being known? Just things coming and going from all the six sense doors. When we're in that, I think you will really have a sense of the selfless, impersonal nature of the whole process. So this exercise can illuminate a lot.

Can you please talk about the difference between consciousness at the sense doors and consciousness? Sometimes in deep concentration I sense consciousness beyond the body. I become consciousness.

There are some subtle points in this question. As you know in the teachings, consciousness is not one thing. Consciousness is arising and passing in each moment. Our experience is really a pairwise progression of knowing an object. The knowing and the object arise together and pass away together. Knowing of a sight, arising and passing. Knowing of a sound, arising and passing. Knowing of a thought. And so on through all the six sense objects. So the first thing to understand is that consciousness is not one thing. There's not one consciousness which is aware of all the different objects. Consciousness itself is arising and passing.

It's a pairwise progression.

I'm going to take a little detour here—and I don't even know if this relates to one of the questions in the pile, but what I learned from my teacher Munindraji, my first teacher, was that when people would ask him questions, he would just answer whatever he wanted to answer, whether it had to do with the question or not. So I learned that from him. It's a great teaching skill.

But this is related. This is just a little sidetrack into an understanding, a description, a way of understanding what non-self means. Because as I said, it's not an easy thing to understand. Our conventional way of being in the world presumes that of course there's a self and an I and a you, and we relate to one another in that way. So what does it mean to say non-self?

One of the examples I've been using recently is that of a river. If we say we're going to go down to the river, sit by the side of a river, we all know what that means. But what is a river? A river is a flow of water. And we give a name to that flow of water: river. So "river" is a designation for something. It's not a thing in and of itself. There's no river as a thing independent from the flow of water.

Self is just like river. Self is a designation for the flow of changing phenomena. What's really happening, as I just said, is a very rapid flow of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. It's happening really quickly, and so it gives the impression of there being something fixed. But one of the insights of insight meditation is that we see there's nothing fixed. Our experience is this flow of changing phenomena, and we simply use the term "self" as a designation for that.

So when we say non-self, it's just reminding us that that term is a concept pointing to something. It's not a thing in its own right. It's a designation for something. And we can use that—it's not that we have to get rid of that word. It's very useful for communication. But what happens is we've become so accustomed to the designation that we think that the self is a something, and that somehow in our practice we have to get rid of it, or we have to—I don't know—blow it up, something. But that's because we're confusing the fact that it's just a concept, just a designation for something, with being a thing in and of itself.

Are we together on this? It doesn't seem complicated to me, but we're very conditioned to be identified with this notion, this idea of self, instead of looking and understanding: no, this is just a word pointing to a flow, just like "river" is a word pointing to the flow.

Okay, why did I get off on that? So, consciousness at the center—the flow is this knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. That's the sixth sense, as was mentioned.

The question continues: "But sometimes in deep concentration I sense consciousness beyond the body."

What can happen when the mind becomes quite concentrated is that sometimes we lose all perception of the body. All that remains is knowing. There's just the knowing. And Mahasi Sayadaw—he's kind of the grandfather of this whole lineage—particularly pointed out this time in practice. This generally happens when the mind has really settled in and is quite concentrated, where the whole felt sense of the body disappears. There's just knowing.

Mahasi Sayadaw taught and wrote that at those times this can be a very blissful state. In a way it's a relief to let go of the more gross perception of the body and just rest in awareness, just knowing. So he said that this is very seductive, that people can really delight in this. But it still is part of the flow of conditioned phenomena.

But it's a very refined state – it's just the knowing. And Mahasi Sayadaw said that at those times, one has to note, whether literally noting or simply noticing: knowing, knowing. So the knowing itself becomes the object of mindfulness.

This brings us back to that last sentence from the Buddha's teaching: "I become consciousness." That's the danger. In that very refined state, we can start identifying with the consciousness, with the knowing. "I'm the one who's knowing." And that identification is just another trap. That's where we get caught. That's where we're creating the felt sense of self – in the identification, whether it's with consciousness or anything else. That's where the felt sense of self comes about. It's when we're identifying with whatever it might be. It could be a thought, it could be a sensation, but in this case, it's with the knowing.

So it's important to be aware that these very refined states can arise in practice. But whatever arises, we have to stay mindful of it so that we're not identifying with it. Certainly in this tradition of practice, the final piece, we could say the highest piece, goes beyond consciousness, goes beyond awareness. But that's the subject of another few hours.

---

Another question came: What advice might you have to share around meditation and the last chapters of life? How has your practice changed as you have reached your seventies? How has your practice changed with the small and large diminishments of aging – in particular, a mind that is more vague, forgetful, with less energy?

Well, I certainly have been noticing some effects of aging. But mostly it's been good, really good. There's a lot less wanting. And I was going to say ambition – not that I was ever super ambitious. But still, when I was younger, there were things to do, things to accomplish. That kind of energy was good, and IMS is one product of it. But as I've gotten older, one can relax. That energy to accomplish has really cooled down.

For myself anyway – and I don't know whether others of you at this stage of life feel it as well – there's really just a settling back and more ease with the unfolding, just as it is now. There's also a lot more inspiration for practice, because there is the acknowledgement, to myself, that there's not unlimited time. Not that there ever is, but it becomes even more apparent as one gets older. For me, there's this wonderful combination of feeling more at ease and relaxed while also being more interested in practice.

Then there's the question about different times – whether because of physical health problems or perhaps mental diminishment in some form. One really important understanding is so helpful at whatever age one is. This is not limited to the later stages of life. And that is – and I hope you really take this in – we can be mindful of anything.

So the mind's confused. It's not clear what's going on. Confusion. We just make a big frame around it: "Oh, there's confusion." In that moment of noting, of noticing "confusion," in that moment we're not confused. We are actually being mindful of that current mind state. But it's so common to think, "Oh, I'm confused," and to assume that because we're confused we can't be mindful. That's the mistake.

Often questions come up about how to practice for dying, or being in the dying process, or being really ill. In a similar way, even before the dying process becomes a question, I find a very useful practice is whenever I'm not feeling well. I'm sick with something – it doesn't have to be a major thing. But when I remember, I take those times of not feeling well to be practice for dying. Because none of us really know how it's going to happen or the circumstances, but there's a good chance we're not going to be feeling well in one way or another. So if we've practiced beforehand, we know: "Oh, I can be mindful of this." It's not pleasant. It's not that mindfulness makes it pleasant. It's being mindful of unpleasantness.

But again, it's about creating a big frame. So instead of getting upset because we can't concentrate in some pinpointed way, or because of some idea of how our practice should be, remember that we can be mindful of anything. This is really a huge, huge help—to apply this understanding with whatever mind states or body states are coming up.

Do you know the paintings of Jackson Pollock? These massive, big paintings with swirls of paint all over the place. At first it just seems really chaotic, chaotic energy. And if we were trying to trace it all, it would be impossible. There's just too much going on. But what happens? You put a frame around the picture, you hang it up on a museum wall, and then you can look at the whole painting from a place of ease, where you're not caught up in the frenetic energy of it. Because we have a big frame, we're seeing the whole, seeing the totality of it from a place of openness, a place of balance.

It's really helpful to remember this in practice. Whenever you have doubts about your practice—"I can't do it now, I can't deal with what's happening"—whatever form it takes, see if you can remember: Can I step back? Can I put a big frame around it? Agitation. Or suppose you have a sitting and your mind is just wandering for the whole hour. Maybe you're judging yourself, thinking your practice is no good. It would be possible just to settle back: "Oh, wandering mind. Just lots of thoughts." You're becoming mindful that that's what's happening, rather than struggling with some idea that you want it to be different. And of course, the ability to settle back and open up to whatever the experience is actually serves to settle things down.

So, Greg told us he considers his mind his best friend, and then added in parentheses, "Hope that doesn't hurt your feelings." Well, it does a little bit. He asked: Would you say the same regarding your mind? If so, can you say what that's like for you?

I think a fruit of the practice is that our minds become our best friends, but we don't often start that way. One teaching which Munindraji, my first teacher, would often say is that the mind can be your best friend or your worst enemy. I think we've all had experiences of that.

This suggests a lot to me. First, and this is part of my investigative tendency, I find it just so interesting to really look into the nature of the mind. Not particular content, but just what the mind is—this capacity to know, the capacity of being aware. And then everything we become aware of, and then all the ways we relate to what we're aware of. To see the mind as this completely dynamic, endlessly transforming energy, which can be used for the greatest good or the greatest harm.

A few years ago, there was a Ken Burns documentary on World War II. It was a very powerful series, ten or twelve episodes, really well done. I was watching it, and at first I was just interested in the historical dimensions—how it all unfolded, what happened. But after a while, because it was so many hours of watching and it was so well done, instead of seeing it that way, I began to see everything that was going on. And it was horrendous. I don't know if this figure is accurate, but something like fifty million people were killed, maybe even more. The horrors of the concentration camps—it was horrendous worldwide.

At a certain point, instead of just seeing the historical aspect, I began to see everything as the manifestation of greed and hatred and delusion. Everything that was going on was coming from those forces in the mind—the fear, the hatred, and all the actions that came from that. It was a reminder of just what the Buddha said in the first verses of the Dhammapada: all is mind-made. It all comes out of the mind.

And this is one of the really fascinating things about meditation practice: we get a front row seat at understanding the mind and everything it does. We see all of these forces within ourselves. It may not be to the point of the destructiveness of that war, but we see many manifestations of greed or hatred or fear or delusion. And we see the potential for the greatest good—when we really see in our own minds, and then by extension in everyone's mind, the potential for generosity and kindness and love and compassion and service.

There's a line from an anonymous samurai poem, and one line has always stuck with me: "I make my mind my friend." I love that. In one way, it's a wonderful description of meditation practice. We're learning to make our minds our friend. What that means is being open to the full range of what the mind is showing us, and then learning how to relate skillfully to whatever it is. When we see the unwholesome aspects, we learn to see them and let go, to let them pass through.

If we get caught up in self-judgment about these unwholesome qualities, or we hate seeing them, or hate that they're arising, we're just strengthening more aversion. That's not a skillful way. So we learn to see it all. Whatever the unskillful patterns are, we see them, we're mindful of them, they come and go. Everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away. And we see the wholesome qualities of mind and we learn to cultivate them. I think we come to a point where we can really say our minds are our best friends—once we have really learned through direct seeing and engagement, through a kind of intimacy with our own minds.

There's another question here: "The further I go in my practice, the more estranged I can feel at times from those not on this path, which leads to some delusion of separateness, yet the differences seem so real. How can I be more inclusive without disregarding my experience?"

That question would take another hour! There are so many different levels to this. A few things are coming to mind.

One is something I've heard the Dalai Lama say very often, a kind of bottom-line foundation of his understanding and his way of responding to the world: acknowledging that everyone wants to be happy. Whatever practice one is doing, or non-practice, however they're living—even when they're doing things that seem really terrible—it's coming from, sometimes a misguided place, but everyone wants to be happy.

If we can understand that, then it's possible first to appreciate the different ways that people go about seeking happiness. There are many different wholesome ways of doing it, and we can appreciate that in other people. They may not be on this path, but they're following their own path for finding happiness in their lives.

And when somebody is doing something we really understand is not leading to happiness, is harmful—instead of anger, we can have compassion. It's like seeing somebody heading toward a cliff through their unskillful actions. Especially when one understands the law of karma, the fact that our actions bring results—if we see it in that broader context, do we get angry, or do we feel compassion and just want to try to help? Sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't.

I want to share one little story here. You may be familiar with Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest in L.A. who has done remarkable work with gang kids there. He started a whole organization that's become hugely successful. His books are quite amazing—like a transmission. He's right there in the middle of it, dealing with horrendous violence. These gangs are killing each other and killing bystanders. It's terrible. But he's right there, and he's done remarkable, remarkable work.

He's written two books. The first is called *Tattoos on the Heart*. If you haven't read it—it was a transmission for me. It really transformed something. The essence of his philosophy is: love no matter what. Just love no matter what. That doesn't mean condoning what people are doing. But love no matter what.

At the time I read it, I was in the midst of a rather intense interpersonal conflict that had gotten pretty convoluted—one of the most difficult things I've been through interpersonally. I was right in the middle of this when I read the book. Love no matter what. Suddenly it touched me. Okay, with this other person, the "problem person"—love no

matter what. It doesn't matter. And then my mind would rush right back to being the lawyer arguing my case, why I was right and they were wrong, all of that. No—love no matter what.

As I sat with it and let it really enter in, there was a real transformation when I realized that the space of love no matter what was so much more open and free than being caught in being right within the conflict. It's like: okay, do I want to just stay being right, in the imprisonment of that?

It was a contraction, and it was very upsetting—not a pleasant place to be. But no, it doesn't matter. Love no matter what. And just that change, that understanding, opened up a new way of being with the situation that was tremendously freeing.

Someone asked where this arose in response to—how can I be more inclusive without disregarding my experience? In some way, that phrase encapsulated for me what inclusiveness truly means. We're not caught up in the differences. And it doesn't mean we don't respond. We can respond to whatever the situation is. But where are we responding from? What's the place? Is it love no matter what? Or is it "I'm right and you're wrong"? Which I was. But it didn't serve me. And it was realizing that. That book really helped me understand this.

We could go on for hours, but we won't. Why don't we just sit for a moment or two and let all the words settle.

CHAPTER 68

# Exploring Nibbāna: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · 1h31

> *In this illuminating conversation hosted by the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Joseph Goldstein offers a comprehensive exploration of Nibbāna—the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice. He begins by explaining his deliberate use of the Pāli term Nibbāna rather than the Sanskrit Nirvāna, which has become diluted in Western culture to mean merely peak sensory experiences. Joseph clarifies that Nibbāna refers to two distinct but related realities: the unconditioned itself (what he evocatively calls "the nothing that is" or "zero"), and the mind that has been freed from defilements.*
>
> *The discussion examines different frameworks for understanding Nibbāna, including the Sutta method's accessible conventional language and the Abhidhamma's granular analysis of mind-moments and mental factors. Joseph addresses apparent contradictions between Theravāda and Thai Forest descriptions—particularly whether Nibbāna is an unconditioned awareness or transcends awareness entirely—suggesting these represent skillful means pointing toward the same liberation rather than metaphysical disputes. He emphasizes the distinction between path moments (magga), which uproot defilements, and fruition states (phala), which are the peaceful enjoyment of that freedom.*
>
> *Practically, Joseph stresses that even initial glimpses of Nibbāna, while profound, do not complete the path—four stages of enlightenment progressively uproot different defilements. He explores how wisdom and compassion are intimately connected: as self-centeredness diminishes through realization, responsiveness to others' suffering naturally increases. The conversation offers both philosophical depth and practical inspiration for understanding how the Noble Eightfold Path leads to the cessation of suffering.*

Welcome everyone. My name is William Edelglas. I serve as Director of Studies here at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts, next door to the Insight Meditation Society, IMS.

Before I introduce Joseph, I'd like to give you some sense of how our time together will unfold. After my introduction, Joseph will lead a short meditation, and then we will have a conversation exploring the question of Nibbāna. That conversation will be grounded in the article that Joseph published in the Insight Journal, the BCBS Journal last fall. Then we are going to invite questions from participants to join the conversation.

I think for many of you, Joseph Goldstein does not need an introduction. He is the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, IMS, and also the co-founder of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. There are many ways of telling the story of Buddhism in North America from the 19th century when immigrants first brought Buddhist practice and ritual from East Asia. But many ways of telling that story of Buddhism in America would include Joseph for his role in founding these institutions that supported the teaching and practice for so many in the insight meditation tradition, and for his own teaching over the last five decades, which has had such a profound influence on so many teachers and practitioners of insight meditation in the West.

Thank you, Joseph, for all of that and for being with us tonight. Maybe I can hand it over to you now to lead us through a meditation.

---

Thank you, William. We thought to just sit for a few minutes, a chance to settle in and settle into a Nibbāna-friendly mood preceding our discussion.

Sit and take a comfortable posture for meditation, whatever that might be, and close your eyes if that's how you usually sit. Start by taking a few deep breaths, just as a way of settling into the awareness of the body. Then let the breath find its own natural rhythm.

Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. It's really that simple.

Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise, but an exercise in awareness. We can allow the breath to follow its own natural way. No need to force it or manipulate it or change it in any way at all.

When sounds appear, simply be aware of hearing. If there are other strong bodily sensations, you can open to the feeling of those sensations, making them the object of your mindfulness. Feeling them, noticing them. And notice what happens. Do they get stronger? Do they get weaker? Do they disappear? When no longer predominant, settle back into the awareness of the body breathing.

Particularly be aware of any thoughts or images that arise in the mind. As soon as you become aware that the mind is thinking, you might make a soft mental note of "thinking," or "seeing" if it's an image. And notice what happens to the thought or image in that moment of awareness.

Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes, re-engaging with the world around you.

---

So, Joseph, maybe to start our conversation, you can say why you choose to use the word Nibbāna?

We hear a lot about Nirvana in Buddhism and also beyond Buddhism. What's special about the word Nibbana? Why use Nibbana?

I use the word Nibbana quite consciously. For those of you who may not be familiar with it, Nibbana is the term in the Pali language, and Nirvana is the term in Sanskrit. There were two reasons I wanted to use the Pali term.

The Sanskrit term Nirvana has really entered into our English lexicon in a way. There are Nirvana restaurants and rock bands and coffees and perfumes. The term Nirvana has taken on a kind of significance in our culture that is somewhat removed from its Buddhist meaning. In the course of conversation, we might refer to some experience as, "Oh, that was Nirvana." It's as if it were some ultimate fulfillment of sense pleasure or desire, the best of something in that realm. Of course, that has nothing to do with the real meaning of Nirvana. So I wanted to use the Pali word to separate us out from the colloquial usage that is now current.

The other reason is that Nirvana or Nibbana can refer to different things or can be understood in different ways in some of the major Buddhist traditions. In the Mahayana tradition, which often uses the Sanskrit term Nirvana, there are subtle differences of understanding than in the usage in the Theravada tradition, which uses the Pali term. I wanted to make clear that in the discussion, both in the essay and this evening, I'll really be talking about it from within the context of the Theravada tradition. In the later traditions of Buddhism, the term Nirvana has taken on some different nuances and meanings. So we'll be talking about it within the context of Theravada Buddhism.

The way we use the word Nirvana reminds me of how we might describe a chocolate cake as divine—which is quite different from an almighty divine being who might create the universe.

Exactly.

In my experience, we don't hear the term Nirvana used very often in Western convert Buddhist dharma centers. It's there, but it's not explored too much. I'm wondering if your teachers talked much about Nibbana, and at what point in your own practice Nibbana became something important for you to think about deeply.

My teachers definitely talked about it and referred to it. It is true that in the West, especially with Western teachers, it's not talked about that often. In reflecting on this, two reasons came to mind why it's not discussed as much as perhaps it should be.

First is the psychology of many Westerners who practice. Sometimes—and this is a generalization, but over fifty years of teaching I've seen it a lot—the Western mind, as we get into practice depending on how it's presented, can really get caught in a kind of unhelpful striving, a misunderstanding of what it means to have a goal. There can be a lot of expectation and striving in a way that really keeps the mind unbalanced. Very often, I think, in the way we present the teachings, we try to minimize that tendency of over-efforting. So I think that's one reason.

It is really important, and this would be a helpful distinction for people to make: it is possible to have an aspiration without an expectation. To have an aspiration for the practice—for that reason, I think it is helpful to talk about Nibbana as setting the direction for where our practice is going. But it gets tricky if it becomes an expectation and a wanting.

The other reason is that teachers who may not have yet experienced Nibbana may be reluctant to talk about it because it is still outside of their experience. But I think that for anybody in a teaching role who has quite a lot of experience on the path, whether or not a person has experienced Nibbana, if we're familiar with the teachings of the Buddha, even on a conceptual or intellectual level—if we have a clear understanding of them—in the teaching role it's actually possible to guide people even to places beyond our own level of realization.

There are stories of this even from the Buddha's time. There was one monk who was not realized, not enlightened, but he had a very clear understanding of the teachings. It's said that he led many of his fellow monastics on to full realization, to arahantship, even though he himself was not realized. In a way, this points to the importance—not only for teachers but for all of us who are interested—to engage in some study of the teachings, because it broadens our understanding beyond our personal experience.

Just as a little plug for the study center here, this is very much what the study center is holding, trying to convey the teachings in their breadth.

For myself, I did actually have a glimpse of Nibbana early on in my practice. So for me personally, it has been the pole star of my practice almost from the beginning. It's always been the central point of understanding of where the practice is leading and what needed to be done to really actualize it fully.

So for you, there's a way in which it functions as an aspiration—

perhaps, but it's something that's grounded in your own experience and might be different from having an aspiration without having that experience.

It is true, and it probably is different. And yet there are people who have not yet had the experience who, for whatever reason—just their paramis, their background—for whom the possibility of awakening, the possibility of liberation, is the driving force. That is why they're practicing. And in understanding Nibbana as coming to the end of suffering, I think that can be a motivation for all of us.

Sometimes we can have an experience of a kind of expansive equanimity, a mind that feels spacious and non-reactive. I think that's something that is relatively common for people on retreat. Is that a glimpse of Nibbana, or is that something else? How would we know if we had a glimpse of Nibbana?

That is something else, because there are many beautiful states of mind that can arise in the practice. Sometimes in the beginning, it may be just a glimpse of them. Deeper in our practice, we can become more stabilized, so that we have easy access to those states. But those beautiful states of mind are still conditioned phenomena. They're arising out of certain causes. The causes and conditions change, and the mind state changes, as we well know. So they are very impermanent. They're conditioned phenomena. And unlike Nibbana, they don't have the power to uproot defilements.

In a way, it's like we're taking a little rest in a pleasant mindset, but a wholesome mindset. So it's definitely a wholesome place to be. But then when we come out of it, we're still subject to the same conditioning of our mind, the working of various neurotic patterns, and the power of the defilements being activated. All that comes back.

There are just two other points to add regarding this question. One is expressing the value of these states even though they're not liberation, even though they're not Nibbana. When we're in a state of profound equanimity—and this is itself a particular stage of Vipassana called mature equanimity about all formations—it is said that when we're in that state, before realization but when our practice has reached that level, we're getting a taste of the mind of an arhant, the mind of a fully enlightened being. We don't want to confuse ourselves and think that it is that state, but it's a taste of that because the stillness and the equanimity and the clarity are so profound. So it's a meaningful experience, even though it's not yet realization.

And then on the other side, it's important to point out that there are many exalted and powerful states of mind that have not uprooted defilements from our mind stream. One famous example from the Buddhist tradition is the Buddha's cousin, Devadatta. He was a monk who had deep concentration and had developed all kinds of psychic

powers, but he was very jealous of the Buddha and committed many really unwholesome, unskillful acts. This points to the fact that even exalted states of mind or great powers of mind do not imply purification of mind. And that's the particular power of Nirvana.

This leads us on to perhaps trying to get at what Nirvana is, as opposed to these other states. In your essay, you talk about a couple of different methods—one you describe as the Sutta method and one as the Abhidhamma method. Maybe to start, what is the Sutta, and what is the Abhidhamma?

This will be an extremely brief clarification of these two terms. As most of you probably know, the Suttas refer to the Buddha's discourses. In the course of his long life, he would meet with many different people, individuals and groups, in a lot of different circumstances. The Suttas are an account of his exchanges in these situations. When we read the Suttas, it's all expressed in very conventional language, in ordinary usage. The Suttas refer to our ordinary way of perceiving things and people—men and women, self and other. These are the conventional ways we speak, and that's the language the Buddha used.

In the teachings in the Suttas, again expressed in very ordinary language that anybody can really understand, he laid out the path of practice as being the path of ethics, sila, of concentration and mindfulness, and of wisdom—the wisdom that develops through seeing the impermanence and the unsatisfying nature of impermanent things. All of this is not difficult for us to understand conceptually, which is what makes the Suttas so powerful. They're very accessible.

The Abhidharma approaches experience in quite a different way. It does not use this conventional language to describe our experience. Rather, it employs very philosophical, we could say technical language—more universal in the sense that it's not language appropriate to a particular time and place, but rather a very detailed analysis of the constituents of what we call man or woman, self or person. It's really looking at what, in Buddhist understanding, are called the more ultimate realities—not the conventional way of understanding, but rather what are the constituent elements that make up experience.

For example, there's a very detailed exploration of the physical elements, describing the sensations and how they interrelate to one another. There's a very detailed description of what are called mental factors—all the different qualities of mind that arise in different combinations along with every moment of consciousness, like greed or hatred or love or compassion or concentration or delusion. All of these are the mental factors or mental qualities which color consciousness. The Abhidharma has this list of fifty-two

mental factors, so it's very specific and very detailed, using this philosophic or technical language. And then there's an explanation of consciousness itself and all the different kinds of consciousnesses that may arise.

For me, I studied philosophy in college, and so my mind has a philosophic bent. I'm not by any means an Abhidhamma scholar, but my first teacher Munindraji was, and he presented the teachings a lot through that lens of Abhidhamma. I found it really helpful because, for example, just having the framework of the different mental factors that color our consciousness and naming them really helps us recognize them in our own minds and see them as being impersonal, non-personal—which helps us not identify with them when they're arising. Of course, this is the whole path leading to Nibbana, leading to freedom.

So these are really two different levels of description, and people may be drawn to one or the other or both. Certainly people get enlightened without any knowledge of the Abhidhamma at all. And for other people, it may be the doorway to greater understanding. But I think it's helpful just to know that there are these two big baskets of the teachings in the tradition: the discourses, the suttas, and the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology.

*Question: As a philosopher myself, I really appreciate the way you framed Abhidhamma. With that as a background, do you want to say a little bit about what you mean by this distinction between the Sutta method and the Abhidhamma method in your essay?*

It's not so much a difference of method but a difference in description. The Abhidhamma way of understanding really analyzes in a very precise way, almost on a mind-moment level, all the various stages of insight that we go through walking on the path, and how the mind is functioning moment to moment as it goes from our usual mundane experience of the world to that moment—it's talked about as crossing over to the supermundane, or to the experience of Nibbana. So the Abhidhamma description really talks about it on that very fine, granular level of what's happening in the mind.

In the Sutta method, it's much more general. It doesn't really talk that much about the mind moments and how they're unfolding and conditioning one another. The suttas talk more in general terms about, for example, the factors of enlightenment—the seven factors of awakening, those qualities which, when developed, become the ground out of which the experience of Nibbana can arise. So it's really just different ways of describing what it is that's happening. One is more granular and one is more... what's the opposite of granular? Larger. Gross.

*Question: One of the things you say on page five is that we need to distinguish between Nibbana itself as unconditioned from what would be a conscious experience of Nibbana, which is conditioned. That sounds like it could be confusing. I'm wondering if you could flesh that out a little.*

Yes, it is confusing. It can be confusing. So I want to give an analogy that came to my own mind in this experience. It's really what popped into my mind just at the moment, just afterwards. The thing that popped into my mind was: this was the experience of zero.

Now, just as a little sidebar here, much later I came across a book called *The Nothing That Is*. The title totally intrigued me because it reminded me of a description of Nibbana—the nothing that is. But the book is actually a history of the number zero. I only got past the first few pages because it started to get very mathematical in its discussion. But the first few lines of the book really captured my interest. It said—this is a bit of a paraphrase, but it's mostly how it was written—"When you look at zero, you see nothing, but look through it and you see the world."

And so the experience of Nibbana, we could think of as the experience of zero. That is, in Buddhist terminology, it's called the stilling of all formations—the cessation of becoming, the cessation of this process of change.

Now, going back to your original question, the knowing of zero is a conditioned phenomenon. That's part of, or within the realm of, our knowing, of our awareness. So we know zero. But zero itself—there's no knowing in zero. There's no knowing in that stillness. So it's the mind, the conditioned mind of knowing, taking zero or Nibbana or the unconditioned as its object.

This is the difference. That knowing is called supermundane consciousness. For those of you who are aspiring Pali scholars, the terms are *magga-phala*, which refers to those kinds of consciousness that are supermundane, because it's not taking a usual object like a sight or a sound or a sensation as its object. It's taking Nibbana as its object. It's taking what is unconditioned as its object. But the knowing itself is still within the realm of conditioned phenomena.

So the question I have for you now is this: did this make it more confusing or less confusing?

*In order to have the awareness of the unconditioned, there are certain conditions—the aggregates or senses, a certain amount of learning, a certain amount of practice. So those are all conditions of the consciousness in order to have the consciousness of that which is unconditioned.*

Yes, yes. Another way to put this—it's actually in the texts where it says, you know, if we want to reach a mountain as our goal, and we walk along the path to the mountain, the path doesn't create the mountain, but it leads to it. And so in the same way, all the conditions that we develop in our practice are like the path to the mountain or the path to Nibbana, but the path does not create the mountain, and the path does not create Nibbana. It just creates the conditions for us to experience it, to realize it, to reach it.

*A lot of the language that we use, and you referenced some of it in your essay, for describing Nibbana is essentially negative—unconditioned, unarisen. There's something paradoxical about language, in that on the one hand it ensnares our minds and we get attached to conceptual frameworks that make it hard to open up to that which might be unconditioned. On the other hand, it is necessary as part of the path to the unconditioned to teach. There's a text attributed to Nagarjuna, the Indian Buddhist philosopher, where in the text, the Buddha articulates this paradox, and then thinking about the paradox, the Buddha laughed. He laughed with all his might. There's something funny about this idea that it's beyond language, and yet he has to teach using language.*

Well, I think that's one of the reasons that when we read the texts, we find Nibbana described in two different ways. One is, as you say, using the negative: unformed, unborn, uncreated, unconstructed. And that is a very powerful reminder for us in the practice. It's expressed in what I think is a classical description from some ancient Indian philosophical paths that use the expression: not this, not this, not this, not this. And so using the unborn, unconstructed, unfabricated can be a reminder to us not to get attached or cling to or be identified with that which is constructed and which is born and which is fabricated. So it's really pointing us in the direction of Nibbana, of what Nibbana is. It's not that. It's not that.

But then in the discourses, there are also some very beautiful descriptions in the more positive sense, like the highest peace, or an island—an island of refuge, a shelter. And it goes on. There are many, many synonyms for Nibbana in this very positive sense. And that language I think is very useful because it's very inviting. When we begin to relate to the positive descriptions of that experience, it sounds very appealing, very worthy. I mean, who among us would not like to experience a place of safety, of refuge, of peace? So that description can really be quite leading, quite beckoning. Whereas the other description is reminding us, we might say, of how to get there, which is not being attached to anything which is constructed or formed. So both kinds of descriptions I think are really helpful.

*Speaking of who wouldn't want to experience this, reminds me of your story in the article about your teacher, Dipa Ma, and how she was able to enter into a fruition state when she sat down in her airline seat. Do you want to say a little bit more about that, and maybe what the distinction is between a fruition state and a path state?*

So this is a distinction that's made in both the Suttas and the Abhidhamma, but they have slightly different interpretations of those terms. For the purpose of this discussion, I'm going to use the Abhidhamma model.

Path and fruition, as I mentioned before, refer to those supermundane states of consciousness that take Nibbana as their object. Now, the path moment has the power to uproot defilements in stages from the mindstream so they don't arise again. That's a very powerful function of Nibbana—it actually uproots the causes of our suffering. The fruition stage is like the enjoyment of that peace, but it has no uprooting function.

According to the Abhidhamma description, there's a path moment—just a single moment—for each of the four stages of enlightenment. At each stage, one path moment uproots or weakens certain defilements. Immediately following the path moment is the fruition state. This happens to everybody, at least for a moment, who experiences the path. But for those who have very high concentration, deep concentration, strong concentration, they have the ability to re-enter into the fruition state for what can be long periods of time.

And Deepa Ma, our wonderful teacher from India—she's just an incredibly inspiring being for me. She had this amazing level of realization, both of awakening and also of her depth of samadhi and everything that came with that. She had the ability to go into the fruition state for many hours at a time. In that state, as I mentioned in the essay, the couple of times she came to America, she would get on the plane, settle into her seat, go into meditation, into this fruition state of ultimate peace, and then emerge just as the plane was landing, completely refreshed and happy. It made me quite—dare I say—envious, having suffered through some very long flights to India and back. It just shows the power of certain minds that can do that.

But it's important to realize that it's the path moment that has the uprooting function. The fruition moment is the enjoyment of that.

Just one more point: I don't want to get into it now, but for those who would like to pursue this a little further, in the essay I do go into a description of the Sutta way of understanding path and fruition, which is slightly different than what I just described. For those of you who might have interest in that, you can read the essay where I explain it in some detail.

Another approach to Nibbana that I discussed in the essay is the Thai forest approach. It's not so much a different approach as a different description of the experience, because those practitioners in the Thai forest tradition are also rooted, to some extent or other, probably more in the Suttas than the Abhidhamma. But I think they understand their way of describing this experience of Nibbana and liberation as being rooted in the Suttas. So this is not separate from that.

One of the differences in description—and it's one of the differences that in some way motivated me some years ago when I wrote the book *One Dharma*, and also in writing this essay—is that the description some Thai forest teachers use seemed, on the surface, quite different than what I understood from my Burmese teachers and from the Abhidhamma way of describing things.

One of the key differences, at least on the surface, is that in the Thai forest tradition there's often a description of Nibbana as being an unconditioned awareness. There's an awareness outside of our usual sense consciousness, an awareness that is unconditioned. That's how Nibbana is sometimes described in the teachings of many of the great Thai forest masters.

In the other traditions, awareness is always considered a conditioned phenomenon, even when it takes Nibbana as its object. So this was always a little confusing for me, because one tradition seemed to be saying Nibbana is awareness—an unconditioned awareness—and the other seemed to be saying Nibbana transcends awareness.

This became a source of real struggle for me in understanding. For many people, it might seem like just a philosophic subtlety that doesn't have much meaning for them. But for me, in the throes of my practice, being so committed to a practice leading to liberation, it felt like a koan: Is Nibbana awareness of some kind? Does it transcend awareness? It felt like here I'm devoting my life to the experience of this—how do I reconcile these apparent differences?

One of the reasons there can sometimes be confusion as we read descriptions of the path and realization from different traditions and different teachers is because the same word can refer to different things. Just as a mundane example, and something that comes up a lot in Dharma discussions: when we talk about the path of practice as becoming free of desire, people will often ask, "Well, what about wholesome desires? The desire for enlightenment, the desire to become more compassionate?" It's the same problem, because the word in English—desire—means different things.

Sometimes it means the desire of grasping and clinging and greed. And sometimes desire means the aspiration to something—I have the desire to do something—and that could be either wholesome or unwholesome.

So Nibbāna, and this took me a while to understand, the term Nibbāna can refer to two different things. It can refer to what I call zero—the nothing that is. And I want to emphasize the is-ness of it, even though it's a nothing that is, because it's precisely because there is an is-ness to it, that is, there is a reality to it, that's why it has the power to uproot defilements. If it was merely nothing, it would have no particular power; it would just be like a blank, but it would not have any particular effect on us. But Nibbāna has a profound effect. It transforms our stream of consciousness, uprooting the kilesas. So there's a power to zero. That's the is-ness of zero.

One meaning of Nibbāna, one thing it refers to, is this unconditioned, unborn, unformed reality. The other meaning of Nibbāna refers to the mind that has been freed of defilements—the mind that is free of greed and hatred and delusion. We could describe the state of a fully enlightened being, in whom these defilements have been completely uprooted, as free of all greed, free of all hatred, free of all ignorance. So that mind itself can be described as Nibbāna, and people experiencing Nibbāna in that way. One meaning is the mind free of defilements, and the other meaning is that which accomplishes the freedom from defilements.

As I read more and more about the Thai way of describing things, I came to conjecture that when they're speaking about Nibbāna as being an unconditioned awareness, they're really talking about the second meaning—that is, the mind unconditioned by greed and hatred and delusion, which could be called Nibbāna. This is a different perspective or a different angle than using Nibbāna to describe the actual experience of zero, of the unborn.

So in a way, even though the descriptions are quite different and initially caused me some confusion—how do I reconcile this? Does Nibbāna transcend awareness? Is it awareness?—this just seemed a way of really holding both. They're not contradictory. And that was really helpful, because this points to another aspect of the teachings which I think has been tremendously helpful for me.

That is to see all of the teachings—whether it's the suttas, whether it's the Abhidhamma, whatever tradition it comes from—to see all the teachings as skillful means for liberating the mind, rather than taking them to be metaphysical truths. Because if we're taking the teachings to be metaphysical truths, then if there are teachings that seem to be in contradiction to one another, we immediately go, "Well, who's right and who's wrong? Which one is correct, which is incorrect?" But if we take the teachings all as

skillful means for liberating our hearts, liberating our minds, then we can really assess: Does this teaching help to free my mind from craving, from grasping, from clinging? Does this teaching help to free my mind from those forces? Even if they're saying different things, even if they're saying contradictory things, if they serve that function, then it's helpful. We're moving forward on the path.

The famous image for this is the image of somebody pointing to the moon. If we want to see the moon, we don't keep looking at the finger. The finger is just pointing to it. And there are many fingers, many hands, which can be pointing to the moon from a lot of different places on this planet. It would be quite foolish if we said, "Oh, that finger is correct and that finger is incorrect." It's more: Are we using it to look at the moon? I think that's a very helpful way of understanding the teachings—understanding them as skillful means for liberation, skillful means for non-clinging.

Before we turn to the questions, I want to just do one little summing up, very briefly. We talked about it, but I just want to bring it all together—why this whole discussion of Nibbāna, or the experience of Nibbāna, is so important. It's not just Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha often characterized his teachings by saying he teaches just suffering and the end of suffering. He wasn't teaching a philosophic system.

It was a very practical teaching. All of the Buddha's teachings are geared to understanding the truth of suffering, which is the first noble truth, along with its cause, its end, and the path to the end.

So what is the cause of suffering? Fundamentally, the cause of suffering in our lives are the different defilements that arise—greed and hatred and ignorance and desire, and all the manifestations of those three basic roots. It's very obvious, I think, that we can't control all the circumstances of our lives. However, we are in control in a very fundamental way of how we're relating to those circumstances. That's up to us. That's not about trying to necessarily change the conditions of our lives in terms of freedom, but changing how we're relating to the conditions of our lives. That's where the freedom lies.

Understanding it in this way, and understanding that it's the defilements in the mind—the forces of greed and clinging and grasping and anger and hatred and fear and ignorance—understanding that it's these forces in the mind which create suffering for us, then we can see and appreciate that the uprooting of these forces in the mind leads to our happiness, leads to our peace. And it's precisely the experience of nibbana which has the power to uproot these tendencies. It's only the experience of nibbana which has that uprooting power.

So that's why this is not just a theoretical philosophical discussion. It has tremendous practical import in terms of our own happiness—which is why we could say enlightenment has been described as the highest happiness, the highest peace. That's the reason we're even engaging in this discussion. It has a lot of meaning in our lives. It's not just Buddhist philosophy—though Buddhist philosophy is pretty good also.

One of the questions that arose concerns the relationship between compassion and nibbana. To me, this is one of the most enriching aspects of understanding the path—to see the intimate connection between wisdom and compassion, between understanding and compassion.

It's helpful to understand how compassion arises in our hearts and minds. It arises when we're willing to come close to suffering. If we're protecting ourselves from the suffering in the world, whether it's our own or that of people around us, if we're avoiding or denying or just not willing to see it, not willing to come close to it—that really caps the wellspring of compassion within us. Compassion arises when we actually open to the suffering that's there.

One of the things that helps us open to it is when we become somewhat less self-referential, less self-centered in our lives. If we're only concerned about ourselves, then we may be more likely just to not want to deal with the suffering that's out there. The realization of nibbana, even the first glimpse of it, uproots what in Buddhism is called the wrong view of self. We have really seen the selfless nature of this whole process. We've come out of a self-centered life to a life where that's not at the heart of things. And there's much more engagement and responsiveness to the situation around us.

One of the great Tibetan masters, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche—a Dzogchen master of the last century, very renowned, an amazing being and amazing teacher—wrote something which I really love because it expresses this so well. He said, "When you realize the void nature, the empty nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others will dawn uncontrived and effortless."

I love that because it really points to the fact that the less self-centered we are, the more responsive we are to the suffering that's in the world. For me, I've come to appreciate the description of compassion not only as a particular feeling or emotion, but as the quality of responsiveness. For example, we see somebody who's hungry, and the natural impulse might be to offer them food. The less the notion of self is at the center of our understanding, the more responsive we are. The experience of nibbana has uprooted the view that there is a self at the center, and so it really just strengthens our compassionate response in beautiful ways. Compassion and wisdom I see as really very interrelated.

Well, I think there's a lot in that question and some very important implications. As I mentioned briefly, enlightenment within the Theravada tradition is described as happening in stages. There are four stages of enlightenment, and at each of the stages, different defilements are either uprooted or significantly weakened.

What's important to realize is that even after that first glimpse, certain of the defilements are uprooted at that point. The most significant ones include the view of self, because there has been the experience of the zero center at the heart of things. There's not a self center at the heart. It's that experience of the zero center which uproots the notion, the view, that there is some core self at the center.

One of the other defilements that's uprooted at that first glimpse is doubt—doubt about the path, doubt about where the path is leading—because we've experienced it for ourselves. As Bhikkhu Analayo used the example, if you've had the experience of having your hand in fire, even for a split second, you know what it feels like and nobody can tell you it doesn't feel like that, because you've had the experience. That's why even at that first stage, it is said that people become independent in their understanding of the Dharma, because it's based on a personal experience of Nibbana, of the Unborn.

However—and this is what's so important for all practitioners to understand—there are still many defilements left. There's still aversion, there's still anger, there's still fear, there's still desire, there's still restlessness. This first glimpse, even though it's hugely significant, is not in any way the end of the path. In fact, we could almost think of it as the beginning of the path.

But this is where some people get in trouble. If there's not a clear understanding of this, people might have a genuine realization and then think they're done, think that everything's finished, not recognizing that there's a lot more work to do. Sometimes they can get into justifying behavior that's perhaps not that skillful because they have this notion that they're fully enlightened, so anything they do must be okay—not realizing that their glimpse might not actually have been genuine, or that it was genuine but still incomplete. There's a lot more to do.

This certainly resonates with my own experience. There's a lot more to do.

So that can help us understand why there might be a teacher who could have profound realization, could have deep awakening, and yet act in ways that, for lack of a better term, we would call problematic—certain kinds of abuse, or that there might be a misunderstanding of what happened.

I'd like to clarify that point a little bit, because I think there is a line here. After a genuine moment of realization, even the first glimpse, certain egregious behaviors cannot happen. Even though there's still desire, there's still aversion, they have been weakened to a certain extent. They're still there, so they will manifest in ways that could be construed as unskillful behavior, but they don't cross a line.

I'm trying to think of a clear way of describing what that line is, but just to use some general terminology, there would not be egregiously harmful behavior. And it's said that if the realization is genuine, even as one may be manifesting aspects of desire or greed or aversion, there's not a hiding of it. There's the acknowledgment: "Oh yes, I've done this, this is unskillful, there is still desire or aversion in the mind." There's just a quality of openness about it. So if the behavior is really egregious and there's no openness and acknowledgment of it, that would make me question whether the realization is genuine or not.

That's a pretty clear criterion that could be applied to a number of people who have been thought of as really helpful teachers for some.

One of the questions posed was about the way in which Nibbana is sometimes framed as extinction, and that it feels like something that might be fearful. In some ways I've already addressed this as the highest happiness, but there's more to say.

I think that term can be understood in a few different ways. First, it's not a term that I would often use, but one does come across it in the texts in some translations. One way of understanding it would be that it's the extinction of the defilements. That's easier to understand.

The problem with using that word to describe the zero of Nibbana is that there's an implication that there is someone becoming extinct. The whole tenor of the Buddha's teachings is that there's no one there in the first place. All that's happening is this ongoing flow of mind-body phenomena, mental and physical phenomena arising and passing away in each moment. There's no one to whom it belongs. What we're calling self is that flow of changing phenomena. It's not that there's a self who owns it or who has it or to whom it belongs.

If we understand that—that there's no self behind it all, that the reality of our experience is the very rapid rising and passing away of the six sense objects—I find this also, as a kind of interesting aside...

We think our lives are so complicated and confusing, but really, only six things are ever happening. There's sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations in the body, and mind objects—thoughts, emotions, perhaps images. That's all that's ever happening. Yet out of that, we create an enormous story about ourselves and the world, which are just more thoughts. That's just one of the six objects.

Sometimes I like to think of the experience of our lives as a six-piece chamber orchestra. It's just sights and sounds and sensations and thoughts and emotions. Sometimes the music is harmonious, sometimes it's really discordant, but it's just that.

So there's no self behind it. That's a little background.

Through the Vipassana practice, through our practice of mindfulness in a really sustained and profound way, we come to experience this whole mind-body process as a flow of changing phenomena. And we're seeing the change very, very rapidly. There's nothing that really lasts more than a moment. It's just continuing—a flow, like a river. There's nothing static at all.

When we see that, we can have another understanding of the first noble truth, which is often translated as suffering, dukkha. But "suffering" is a limited description because much of what's happening in this flow may be pleasant, and we don't experience it as suffering. However, through the experience of the radical impermanence of all experience, we begin to really see the essentially unsatisfying nature of this constant flow of arising and passing, arising and passing. Nothing lasts for very long. It's a very quick process of change.

As a little exercise, which I've found very helpful in showing how we can get ensnared and seduced by the flow—and what kind of insight will help us release from being seduced—think back to all the beautiful experiences you've had in your life. There are many; most of us experience lots of pleasant things. But when we look back at the past, where are they now? They were pleasant in the moment, but they're completely gone. Completely gone.

And yet, when we look ahead in our lives, we're always living in anticipation of the next hit of enjoyment of one kind or another. It may be sense pleasures, it may be emotional states, whatever. We are always looking forward to the next hit of experience that somehow is going to fulfill us—forgetting that we've already had endless numbers of these experiences, which have not been ultimately fulfilling. They are fulfilling in the moment. I'm not saying they don't bring a certain kind of happiness. But they're not ultimately fulfilling because they're constantly changing.

So when we have really dropped into this flow of experience and are experiencing it through the lens, with the understanding of what is a very basic teaching in Buddhism—the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfying because of impermanence, and non-self—then we realize that in this flood, there's no rest. There's not really any peace.

When we absorb that fully—which takes time, because this goes against our conditioning; we're swimming upstream in terms of the conditioning in our minds—but as we understand this and experience it in a very profound way, then, as I mentioned earlier, the cessation of becoming, the cessation of this continual flow that doesn't belong to anybody... So it's not the cessation of a self. There's no self in the first place. All it is, is this endless arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing of phenomena.

The cessation of that flow is really the experience of peace—you could say the highest peace or the highest happiness. And a point which I'll make now, but explore in more detail in the essay, is that this experience of the cessation of becoming is its own reality. It is a reality. It's not simply an absence. It's its own reality, which has power. It has the power to uproot defilements. It's to appreciate the nothing that is—but there's an is-ness to it.

Of course, we can talk about this, and hopefully it's of interest, and even more hopefully perhaps helpful. But it's really important to understand that this whole discussion is for the purpose of inspiring us to experience it, because then we know for ourselves. It's not believing anything. You don't have to get into "I agree with this, I don't agree with this," or some intellectual debate about it. When we know from our experience, that's when real faith arises. So I just want to emphasize the practical, experiential nature of everything we're talking about.

So maybe there'll be another opportunity. But we are coming to the close of this time together. And Joseph, I'm wondering if there's a question that you wish you'd been asked, or anything else that you feel would be helpful to say about Nibbāna before we close?

I think I've made a lot of the points that I would like to make, but this is just maybe by way of summing up. Especially given the prevalence now of mindfulness being taught in a secular context—which is tremendously valuable and helps people a lot—it's really missing this piece. Nibbāna is not often talked about as mindfulness is being taught in the secular context.

So I just want to emphasize that the Buddha laid out a path. I'm sure most of the people listening are familiar with the Eightfold Path. It's one of the core basic teachings of the Buddha. And it's a path that leads somewhere. It's not just these eight different things that we practice with and they help in our lives, which they will do. So it has that function. But it's more profound than that, because the Eightfold Path is a path, and the path leads to the experience of Nibbāna. The Buddha was very explicit about this in his teachings.

And so I would say, for those people who may have an interest or be inspired or have an aspiration for this level of practice, for this depth of practice, I would encourage you to really investigate more thoroughly each of the steps of the Eightfold Path. You could really do some study with this, and then really see how you can put each of those steps into practice in your life. This is really a way of transforming one's life into the path. And it's the path that leads to Nibbāna, it leads to awakening, it leads to freedom.

Maybe this could just be a moment to give a plug for the Study Center. Institutions like the Study Center play this very valuable role in the transmission of the teachings from one culture to another, acting as a container, as a preserver of the teachings, and a space for discussion and exploration of the teachings. And the Study Center also depends on support from all the people who benefit from it. So I would just encourage you—this teaching tonight has been offered completely freely. But if you're so inspired and would like to be supportive of the Study Center, it would certainly be appreciated because it helps to support everything the Study Center is doing.

And I would love to have further discussions about this. Quite happily, I'm about to begin my own self-retreat now for hopefully three months. So maybe upon emerging, I'll have some new understandings to share.

Thank you. It's really been a pleasure exploring all of this with you.

Thank you so much, Joseph. And thank you, everyone, for joining us.

CHAPTER 69

# The Map of Wisdom: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein on the Core Buddhist Teachings

Joseph Goldstein · 1h32

> *In this rich dialogue hosted by the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Joseph Goldstein shares how the Buddha's core teachings spontaneously arranged themselves during meditation into what he calls "the map of wisdom." Beginning with the universally accessible truth of impermanence (anicca), Joseph illuminates how this understanding naturally unfolds into the Four Noble Truths, using the evocative metaphor of "rope burn"—the suffering that arises when we grasp tightly at phenomena that are inherently changing.*
>
> *The conversation explores paṭicca samuppāda (dependent arising), particularly the crucial link between vedanā (feeling tone) and craving where liberation becomes possible. Joseph explains how mindfulness allows us to break this chain by accepting pleasant and unpleasant experiences without reactivity—transforming the simple recognition "it's okay" into a doorway to freedom. He addresses the relationship between relative and ultimate truth, drawing on teachings from Sŭng Sahn and Padmasambhava to show how understanding emptiness enhances rather than diminishes our ethical attention.*
>
> *Perhaps most significantly, Joseph articulates how compassion emerges naturally from insight practice, describing compassion as "the activity of emptiness." As we become less self-centered through understanding anattā (non-self), we become more responsive to suffering around us. The practice question "How can I help?" becomes a mantra that opens us to genuine connection without the burden of perfectionism. This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a coherent vision of how Buddhist doctrines work together as a unified path toward the unconditioned—Nibbāna.*

I serve as Director of Studies at the Barry Center for Buddhist Studies, which is here in Barry, Massachusetts, on the traditional homelands of the Nipmuc people.

The first part of our evening will be a conversation in which I'll mostly be asking Joseph questions that are based on the two Dharma talks that were linked in the announcement for this evening. And in the second part of our time, Joseph is happy to take questions from anyone on the call. I suspect there will be many more questions than Joseph will have time to answer. And in some ways, I think that's a good thing. In the Dharma world, we often think of living with a question as better than getting an answer, which may close the door to your questioning.

I'm going to give a brief introduction to Joseph Goldstein, who has been practicing and teaching Buddhist meditation for more than 50 years. And I believe I speak for many of us when I say that the clarity of your teaching, Joseph, both with regard to doctrine and practice, has been so very helpful. And you deliver it all with humility and a sense of humor. Joseph has written too many books to name here, but suffice it to say that these books have been translated into numerous languages and have been supportive for beginners and advanced practitioners across the world.

Joseph is a co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, our neighbor here in Barrie, and also a co-founder and longtime board member here at the Barrie Center for Buddhist Studies. You, Joseph, have devoted your life to writing, teaching, training other teachers, and the building of institutions that have supported so many practitioners over the years. And I am so grateful for all that you've given in your life and so grateful to be exploring the map of wisdom with you here—and the territory as well as the map.

---

Thanks, William. It really is a pleasure to be with everyone. The technology continues to amaze me, that people can join from all over the world. It's really quite remarkable.

I thought we'd just begin this evening with a very short sitting, a few minutes, as a way of just landing and settling, getting centered. If you just take a reasonably comfortable meditative posture. If you're used to closing your eyes when you're sitting, you can close your eyes. It's also possible to sit with the eyes open if you're accustomed to that.

Begin by taking just a few deep breaths to really inhabit the body. Let the breath find its own natural rhythm. Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise—it's an exercise in awareness. Simply feel the breath, each one, however it presents itself. Long or short, rough or smooth. Simply be aware of it as it is.

Sometimes we feel the breath at a particular place in the body, like the nostrils or the rise and fall of the chest or abdomen. Sometimes you can feel the breath throughout the whole body. It's possible to experiment and just see where the mind settles most easily.

See if you can stay alert for the arising of thoughts and images in the mind. Notice whether you become aware of them quickly, or you get lost in them for some time and then wake up to the fact that you're thinking. Cultivate a kind of investigative mind that takes interest in what it is that's happening.

As you breathe in, know you're breathing in. As you breathe out, know you're breathing out. You can keep it that simple.

That nice Tibetan bell is actually an app on the iPhone—a little technological aid.

So we titled this evening "The Map of Wisdom," which is the title of two dharma talks that Joseph gave not too long ago. Tonight I'll just be asking questions based on those dharma talks, and Joseph will be unpacking them to some degree. If you have not had the opportunity to listen to them, that's okay. And if you would like to listen to them, you can find them on Dharma Seed, or through a link on our website.

At the beginning of your first talk, Joseph, you described how you were sitting in meditation and the Buddha's core teachings arranged themselves in a certain order. You came to think of this arrangement of teachings as the map of wisdom. Maybe we could just start there. What do you mean by the map of wisdom, and why might it be helpful to a practitioner to have some sense of this map?

That name or title for the talks just came to my mind. I wouldn't think of it as we might normally think of a map—as going from one place to another in a direct line. It was more that as I was sitting, and probably many people have this experience, there are so many different aspects of the Buddhist teachings, but what's so remarkable is the inner consistency among them all. As I was sitting, different aspects came to mind, almost like a mandala, starting with that sense of impermanence and then all the implications of what impermanence leads to. As I was reflecting, it came quite intuitively—just out of that baseline of understanding impermanence, all of these different aspects really fell into place. I felt like it was such a natural and intuitive description of the unfolding of the path. So it's a map in that sense, one that really touches on many of the different core teachings of the Buddha, all pointing to liberation.

Do you want to say a little bit about why it might be beneficial for us to have such a map as we engage in the path?

I think it can be really helpful because sometimes we get so narrow in our view of what the path is about, and about the teaching. We get so entangled in our own individual process, and we forget this—the word that comes to mind is *glorious*—this glorious expression of the Dharma with so much subtlety and so much nuance and so many levels of understanding. A chance to explore each of them in turn, but also how they relate to one another, becomes this beautiful mandala of the teachings that really enlarges our own understanding of what we're doing in the practice. It comes out of the practice itself, as it did for me in that sitting, but it also comes through study. That's why the study center is so valuable, because it enlarges our understanding of what the Buddha taught. And it's really a magnificent understanding.

You quote Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, as saying that the most basic teaching of Buddhism is that everything changes, that everything is becoming otherwise. You also note that as we get older, it seems to be coming otherwise even faster—I think you mentioned that at some point, it might feel like breakfast comes every 15 minutes. Could you say what you take this to mean, that everything changes, and why it's so important?

In the Buddhist teachings, there are some things which we can understand and grasp, even at first intellectually and conceptually, and then experientially. But some aspects of the teachings seem quite obvious and common sense and intuitive, whereas other aspects are more nuanced and more subtle and sometimes even counterintuitive—like the teachings on non-self, which many people find challenging to really understand.

Starting with impermanence is something that I think everybody can relate to. Even if we're not living by that understanding, we know it to be true. We could go up to anybody, whether they're practitioners or not, go up to anybody on the street and ask them, "Do things change?" Of course, everybody will say yes, because things are changing on every level, from the microscopic to the macroscopic, all the time. So it's not a hard concept to grasp, and it's not that difficult, when we pay attention, to begin to have some direct experiences of it.

Then there are huge implications when we really do realize and experience change on more and more subtle levels. It has huge implications for how we understand what creates suffering in our lives and how to ease that, how actually to become free. So in that way, starting with the teaching on impermanence is just a good place to start because it's like open access for almost everybody.

So you talk about how everybody can understand the teaching of impermanence. In what particular way do you think meditation practice can open up an insight into this teaching that may be different from, say, an intellectual argument about everything being impermanent?

I think there are actually some intermediate steps as well, from the intellectual conceptual understanding to direct experiences of it that people have, but on a rather gross level.

So for example, we know the weather changes and the seasons change and our bodies change. This doesn't take meditation to become aware of—these are just obvious aspects of our lives.

But in meditation, as we practice and develop some degree of concentration, some strength of mindfulness, we begin to see impermanence at work on more and more subtle levels. We begin to get a very clear understanding that our thoughts come and go, that the different emotions arising in the mind are coming and going. We can actually immerse ourselves right in that process, right in the midst, for example, of a strong emotion.

If we have practiced mindfulness, instead of drowning in the emotion or being lost in it or totally identified with it, it's actually possible to explore the energetics of that emotion. What's happening in our minds and bodies energetically when there's anger or excitement or happiness or sadness? We begin to see the dynamic nature of it. It's not some solid thing.

As we begin to see the changing nature even within these phenomena, we're not holding on so tightly. And as we're not grasping at it so tightly, it actually passes through more easily. This is not a pulling away, not denying, not pushing away—but it's not holding on either. It's not being identified with it and lost in it. So there just comes to be a lot more ease and interest.

Something I've said very often in the teachings, especially with situations of suffering or distress: when those situations arise in my mind, they really pique my interest. When there's some strong something happening, it's like, "Whoa, okay, what is this? Can I really investigate it with interest?" That's a whole different perspective than just being the victim of whatever we happen to be feeling. It really turns things around and becomes the source of wisdom.

So that's what meditation can bring us—into the heart of what it is that's happening. And in doing that, we see the very changing nature of it all.

*May we all bring curiosity to stress.*

There's a little phrase I've been using lately: don't waste your suffering. Meaning it can be explored. We can learn a lot from it, rather than it just weighing on us.

While we're on the topic of suffering and distress and dukkha, in the first talk you give an account that moves from impermanence through the Four Noble Truths. You use a great metaphor that you got from one of your yogis in an interview—about rope burn. Can you say what that metaphor is and perhaps unpack how impermanence relates to the Four Noble Truths?

It was a wonderful metaphor that this student came in with. If we're holding on, grasping tightly to that which in its very nature is changing, it's like holding on tightly to a rope that's being pulled through your hand. If it's being pulled inexorably, the tighter you hold on, the more you're going to get rope burns. The more you can relax the hand and not hold on, the rope just gets pulled through easily.

The rope being pulled is like the flow of phenomena, the flow of experience, the impermanent flow of what's happening. If we're holding on to any experience, it's going to be the cause of rope burn—of suffering—because everything in its nature is changing. If we're holding on to our body being a certain way, or wanting our mind states to be a certain way, or emotions to be a certain way, the more we hold on, the more we suffer.

This goes right to the heart of the Four Noble Truths, where the Buddha talked about suffering. The cause of it is craving and clinging and grasping. And the end of it is the letting go of that clinging.

As we settle in, in a really profound way, to the flow of changes—and we can do this in our practice in very subtle ways, where we're just feeling all of the energy of the body, the sounds coming and going, thoughts and emotions, and we're really in the flow—then it becomes so clear that when the mind is relaxed and open, it's just empty phenomena rolling on. It's a very easeful state. And yet when there's desire or grasping or clinging, that's when we feel some stress, some anxiety, some dukkha, some suffering.

There's a wonderful image I haven't talked about in a long time. It was a monkey trap in Sri Lanka, very clever. People would hollow out a coconut with just a slit in the bottom, put in some food that the monkey liked. The monkey would slip its hand in and grasp the food, and then couldn't get out because the fist was too large for the opening. Really, all the monkey had to do was open its hand, slip out, and be free.

But it was a very rare monkey that could let go of the banana, of the food, whatever it was. So we're kind of like those monkeys. We hold on even when it's causing us suffering, because we haven't at least completely learned: oh, all I have to do is let go, slip out, and enjoy that freedom.

This is a lot of what our practice is about. One phrase the Buddha used very often—it comes up very frequently in the Buddhist discourses—talks about liberation through non-clinging. It's a very simple phrase, but it really gets to the heart of it, and to the heart of what we're practicing.

One time I was having a discussion with Bhikkhu Anālayo. He's a resident monk at the study center. We were just talking about different kinds of practice, and he asked me, "What kind of practice do you do? Do you do Vipassana or Theravada or Tibetan?"

You know, the many different forms. And I said, "I just practice non-clinging, because that's the essence of them all." Instead of getting into fights and arguments about which is better or quicker or faster, it's just that they're all skillful means for not clinging. And that becomes more possible for us the clearer we see the impermanence of phenomena.

I think for a long time, when I hear the phrase "liberation through non-clinging," I will think of that monkey in Sri Lanka holding on to the banana with its hand in the coconut.

*Joseph, in your response you mentioned that when we can see things as empty phenomena, that can support us in letting go, help us relax our clinging, help us let go of the banana when we have our hands caught in the coconut. I can imagine some people might be thinking, "Yes, well, there are some things that might be appropriate to let go of, but what about morality or justice or climate change or certain kinds of social norms or dear people to us?" In your talk, you mentioned the distinction that some Buddhist traditions make between ultimate and conventional. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to say a little bit more about this distinction and how you approach what one might think of as empty phenomena in a world where there are things that really matter to us at the same time.*

Before I get into a little discussion on the two levels of truth—the more relative and ultimate—I think it's helpful to realize that even with things that are of value in our lives, whether it's relationships or commitment to non-harming or whatever it may be, attachment is something extra. We can be committed to all of these various aspects of our lives without attachment.

A good example of this, which is kind of rife in the world today in so many different religious traditions: when fundamentalism becomes strong, it's really out of that attachment to a certain set of beliefs. This can often lead to intolerance. One can have tremendous reverence and respect and dedication to a set of beliefs, but it doesn't have to come out of a fundamentalist attachment to them. Then there's just much more possibility when people come together with various viewpoints and various ideas for an open discussion. We see how increasingly rare that kind of openness to discuss differences is these days. And that's because of the attachment. It's not necessarily because of the thing being attached to.

I just wanted to clarify that attachment never adds anything to a situation, but we often think it does. It's sort of like confusing attachment and love. They're two quite different things, but they've gotten so conflated very often.

*That's a great point to make. I think it's really important.*

I feel so. I've seen it so often in my own mind and in the world. So much of the conflict in the world comes out of attachment to beliefs rather than simply having the beliefs.

In terms of the two truths, I have found this to be a very useful framework for understanding how to move through the world. The relative level of truth is really our conventional understanding of things. At this conventional level, there's a self and there's others. It's just the ordinary circumstances of our lives. And within that, we want to pay attention to the results of our actions. Here's where the law of karma, which is such an important part of the Buddhist teachings, comes into play, because the Buddha emphasized again and again that our actions have consequences depending on the quality of our mind as we engage in the action.

Even though trying to understand karma can sometimes be very challenging for people in different aspects of it, increasingly, especially as I'm getting older, I think it's something that is so important for us to understand because it gives us agency about how our lives unfold. The Buddha was very clear. There's a very explicit discourse in the Middle Length Sayings where he described how different actions lead to different results—how generosity leads to abundance and non-harming leads to good health, with many very specific examples.

People often have a problem with this because when looking back at a challenging circumstance, they think, "I must have done something terrible in my last life." That's not so helpful. I think it's more helpful to recognize that there can be many causes for something to happen.

But I think really exploring what the Buddha taught about wholesome and unwholesome actions leading either to happiness or suffering—that's a really important part of the teachings, because that is a map to happiness. The Buddha is just laying out these are the kinds of actions that lead to our wellbeing. And so when we get really familiar with them, it gives us agency for the creation of our lives going forward.

So the more ultimate level is the understanding that there is no self. There is no one there. It's just phenomena arising and passing away. And when we're on that level—for example, we may have different kinds of thoughts. If we're in the flow of change, if we're just seeing things arising and passing without any identification with them, on that level it does not matter what kind of thoughts we're having, because it's just empty phenomena. It's a thought appearing and disappearing, just like a sound can appear and disappear. So on the ultimate level, if we are truly there and it's not just a concept for us, then we're in a place of that empty phenomena rolling on, and the mind is very spacious, very open.

I want to use an example that might illustrate the two levels. So I'm holding up this mug, and on the relative level, it's a mug. We can describe it and have all kinds of views about its aesthetics, its utility, whatever. If we looked at that mug through a high-power microscope, there would be no mug. It would be a whole other level. If we could see the subatomic particle level of what makes the mug, that's a whole different reality being experienced. The interesting thing is that the relative level of mug and the more ultimate level of just particles arising and passing away—it's a unity. It's the same phenomena seen on different levels.

Now, they work so well together because the more we understand the more ultimate level, then we can operate on the relative level with less grasping and less clinging, because we understand its basic empty nature. But on the relative level, we need to pay attention to whether something is wholesome or unwholesome.

I'll give you a few aphorisms from different great teachers that kind of encapsulate this teaching. One was from the Zen master Seung Sahn, who established the Providence Zen Center and a worldwide network of Zen centers. He said, "There's no right and no wrong"—so that's the ultimate level, just changing phenomena, changing very rapidly—"there's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." And we have to hold both.

The great Tibetan master Padmasambhava, considered one of the greatest Tibetan masters, said, "Though my vision, my understanding, is as vast as the sky, my attention to the law of karma, of cause and effect, of the results of actions, is as fine as a grain of barley flour."

This union of the two is really important because people can use the idea, "Oh, it's all empty, so it doesn't matter what I do." That is a huge misunderstanding. It matters immensely what we do. And yet the understanding of the emptiness allows us to navigate with much greater ease. I don't know if that was clear for you all, but that topic is worth exploring—this union of the relative conventional level with the underlying wisdom of the more ultimate level.

*Question: What you were just talking about reminds me of something you said in the middle of your second talk about dependent arising, the doctrine of dependent arising holding all these different doctrines together—certainly holding together causality and karma and the ultimate and the relative, and how we might think about practice in a world that is impermanent. Can you start by just saying what is dependent arising?*

So this teaching of the Buddha is really a core teaching, fundamental, and it takes quite a bit of exploration to really understand it in depth. But most simply—and this will be very simple, which is probably a reflection of how well I understand it—it describes the links, and in the traditional version, the links in the mind from the last life which result in rebirth in this life. Starting with ignorance: because of ignorance, we get involved in all kinds of activities, those volitional activities. And those karmic activities are the cause of rebirth.

The links go on to describe the whole development—consciousness arising in the first moment of this life, then the development of the mind and body and the sense spheres. The middle part of dependent origination is really where we can hone in on our practice and understand how it relates to our suffering and freedom. It talks about the development of the body and the sense spheres, the different sense organs and their respective objects, and how that leads to contact—sense organ, contact, sense object.

Here's where it starts to get really very precise and very interesting in a way that we can apply. The Buddha talked about how in every moment of contact—with a sight, with a sound, with a thought—along with that contact is what he called vedana, or translated into English, feeling tone.

And that is, with every contact we are tasting it, so to speak, as being either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. This just happens automatically. We cannot prevent it from happening. When there is contact, it automatically leads to this feeling tone.

This is not mysterious. We go through our lives feeling things as being either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, through all our five physical senses and the mind.

Now this feeling tone of vedana is crucial in the whole path of liberation. When we're not mindful, pleasant feeling conditions desire. We see this in our lives. We like it. How many of us can have just two spoonfuls of ice cream? I think it's rare. For most of us anyway, it's quite a pleasant taste experience, and so the pleasant leads to "let me have another taste, another taste." This is operating through all of our senses, all kinds of experiences. Pleasant experience conditions desire when we're not mindful.

Unpleasant conditions aversion. Very few people in their lives, when they're experiencing pain, say "oh good, let me experience more." Usually it's "no, I want this to go away." We have aversion towards it. And with neutral feeling, we generally space out.

Continuing with the links: because of desire, then there's clinging and grasping, and out of that, all kinds of karmic actions, which again lead to birth, and birth inevitably entails aging, illness, and death. So that's the chain of dependent origination.

The Buddha pointed out—and this is where our practice becomes profound—we can break the link, we can break this chain going from ignorance to suffering at the link between feeling and craving. We can learn how to be mindful of pleasant feeling. In being mindful of it, we're no longer craving. We're taking interest in it. We're just noticing pleasant, pleasant. It doesn't mean not experiencing it. We are experiencing the pleasant, but without grasping. And we can experience unpleasant sensations without aversion.

One of the little mantras I've used with unpleasant experiences: when I can watch my mind, the tendency to "oh, I don't like this" or "I want to get rid of it," I substitute a little mantra at that point—"It's okay. It's okay to feel this. It's unpleasant and it's okay to feel it." That just relaxes the mind in the experience of it. It doesn't drive us to aversion and then all of the actions following from that.

This is how we begin to free our mind from that conditioning of desire, attachment, and clinging, or aversion, to a place of really greater ease and spaciousness. If we understand, even in this very abbreviated way, this chain of dependent origination and see where we can enter into it in a way that frees us, it's profound. It really can transform our lives.

*

The question was raised about the brahmaviharas—the four immeasurables, the divine abodes. Some people say that really, if you want to make progress, insight is where the action is, and that the brahmaviharas are a nice complement but not really essential. Was I suggesting that compassionate responses and action toward others are actually an embodiment of insight, where insight gets traction?

I think this is really important. It really opened for me when I began to explore this in a deeper way. It wasn't from the very beginning of my practice, because I wasn't getting those teachings, but it came mid-practice when all of a sudden the role of compassion as being embedded in the process of insight just became more and more clear.

It relates to what I was saying about dependent origination. Compassion arises when we're willing to come close to suffering. If we're in a place of denial or apathy or indifference to suffering, whether our own or others', there's no opportunity for compassion to arise because we're trying to keep the suffering at bay.

That itself is a very contracted, defensive way to go through life.

So going back to what I was just saying about mindfulness practice: we learn how to be okay with unpleasant experiences. Coming close to suffering can be unpleasant. We really start to feel, understand, and relate to the pain of others—their struggles, their difficulties—and within ourselves as well. It's mindfulness that allows us to come close to it. As I was saying, it becomes okay to feel this. Let me feel it. As we're open to suffering, as we're willing to see it and come close to it, that's what opens up the possibility—it opens up the wellspring of compassion.

So that's one aspect: the willingness to come close to suffering that is enhanced by our practice of mindfulness.

In another way, the whole path of insight, through our continually refined perception of change, brings us to glimpses—and later, profound experiences—of the selfless nature of this whole process. There's no one behind it to whom it's happening. We are this flow of changing phenomena. It's not that it's happening to someone.

The more we understand this selfless nature, the less self-centered we become. Instead of having our whole lives revolve around a strong sense of self—what we want, what's important to us, everything that self-centeredness implies—through insight practice we begin, in a significant way, to get some sense of it: oh yes, this is a selfless process, a process empty of self. We become less self-centered, and that allows us, creates the space for us, to be present with and relate to the suffering that is all around us, that is in the world. If we're self-obsessed, we won't be very open to the challenges, difficulties, and pain that other people may be going through.

As this relationship between emptiness of self and compassion started to come together for me, a phrase came to mind: compassion is the activity of emptiness. There's a union there—they're not two separate things. When we're in a more selfless place, compassion arises quite naturally.

A word I like to use, really as synonymous with compassion but one that helps me understand the mechanism of it, is *responsiveness*. When we're not so self-absorbed, our hearts and minds are quite naturally responsive to the situations and circumstances around us. There's somebody hungry—we feed them. There's some need over here and we're able to fulfill it—we fulfill it. Sometimes there may be a strong feeling of compassion associated with it, but sometimes it just becomes almost like a law of nature. When we're not caught up in selfing, this responsiveness happens more and more naturally and spontaneously. I find it's a beautiful unfolding when we start proceeding along that trajectory.

In this way, compassion and insight are, to me, just inextricably related.

---

*Thank you, Joseph. I want to ask one more question before we open it up. It's a question that comes from reflecting on how, in your teaching, you often turn to a poem at important points—integrating poetry into your teaching. I know you've been writing poetry and you've shared a number of your poems with me. I'm interested in hearing what you think the role of hearing, listening, teaching with, or writing poetry might be in relationship to being on the path.*

---

I'm not sure I have this exactly right, but I seem to recall something Mary Oliver once said—a great, truly great poet. She was equating the poetic sensibility with paying attention. Her poems so reflect that, because her attention to her experience is so exquisite, and then her use of language to describe it.

I find that poetry is often a crystallization of a very clear perception of something, not embedded in a long dissertation. It's condensed, concise, very specific and very clear—and it illuminates. The poetry I read often illustrates some particular experience we have in our lives that reveals a real dharma understanding.

I'll share one of my little poems because it illustrates this point. I was on retreat, doing walking meditation, just hearing different sounds. And then this haiku-like poem simply came to mind:

*Bird song in the empty sky of my mind.*

Those words reflected the experience. They highlighted that yes, the bird song and everything else is arising as an appearance in the mind—the empty sky of the mind.

And so that's just an example of how we can take a few words, a few lines, and really point to some experience that can be tremendously illuminating. I love it. When the muse strikes, I love the creative process of writing, and also just reading and sharing poems that have really moved me.

*Question: How are not-selfing and responsiveness related to interdependence?*

Interdependence is really another word for selflessness, because what it points to is that everything—including what we call ourselves—arises out of particular conditions coming together. And if the conditions are no longer there, then the experience is not there.

I'll share an example I use very often for understanding interdependence and emptiness of substantial existence. In the case of a human being, we say it's empty of self. But the example I'll use is something in nature: a rainbow. We can go outside after rain, conditions around, we see a rainbow, and it's beautiful. We all enjoy the beauty of the rainbow. But the rainbow is not a thing in itself. The rainbow is an appearance that arises out of conditions of moisture and light and air coming together in a certain way. These conditions come together resulting in the appearance of a rainbow. And so, mixing metaphors a little bit, we could say the rainbow is selfless in that sense. It's not a thing in itself. It's arising out of conditions, and when the conditions change, the rainbow disappears.

We can apply this to the whole mind-body process. There's an interdependence. We come into existence dependent on so many conditions coming together, and we continue living through so many conditions coming together. There's not some core being that exists independent of those conditions. What we're calling self is like the rainbow—it's an appearance arising out of the coming together of all the conditions which go into making this mind and body. Interdependence is really just another way of saying or understanding what selflessness means.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks beautifully about this. He's spoken of what goes into the food that we eat and how many conditions come together for this food to appear before us—the seed for the plants, the moisture in the earth, then all the people cultivating it, all the people transporting it. He goes on and on. There's an enormous number of conditions which go into even a very simple activity like eating. It just shows how everything is interdependent, without substantial self-existence. It's the appearance of things coming together in this interrelated way. The two are very, very—you could almost say they're synonymous—emptiness and interdependence.

*Question: With all this emphasis on conditioned arising and what later Buddhist traditions think of as interdependence, what about the unconditioned—that which is not changing? Are there practices that allow one to bring the unconditioned into the foreground? What might that mean?*

That's getting to the heart of the matter. It's interesting—the Buddha talked about this, and it's quite a remarkable statement. I can only paraphrase, but he says his teaching is not for the purpose of morality. It's not for the purpose of concentration. It's not for the purpose of insight. All the things we think we're practicing for, he's saying we're not actually practicing for them. That's the mechanism. We're practicing for what he

called the sure heart's release, which is the experience—or comes out of the experience—of the unconditioned, which in Buddhism is called Nibbāna or Nirvāṇa. Different Buddhist traditions will have different interpretations of that.

William and I had a previous session like this, offering reflections on Nibbāna, so those interested might explore that conversation further.

The whole path of insight that we're on—the practices of morality and generosity and loving-kindness and insight, the Vipassanā practices—culminates in the experience of the unconditioned, that which goes beyond or transcends this conditioned process of changing phenomena. These moments of experiencing the unconditioned have the power to uproot, in stages, the various defilements in the mind which keep us bound to the conditioned. At different stages, it uproots the view of self, it uproots desire and aversion, and finally uproots all ignorance. It is very much the culmination of the path.

This could be a many-hour topic, but I want to say that very often these days, especially with the spread of what has been called secular mindfulness—which is all to the good, helpful and useful for whatever domain it's applied in—as mindfulness practice spreads so widely, we often lose sight of really the goal the Buddha was talking about: liberation, freeing our mind from ignorance. That comes about through the whole path, which the Buddha described as the Eightfold Noble Path with its different components, culminating in this experience of the unconditioned. I think it's very good to explore this and really understand that it's the highest value.

Here's a question I think is very important, from somebody who says they understand that things are impermanent, and that even when there's a strong emotion, by being non-reactive and allowing it to pass through, it can pass more quickly and easily. But what about particular patterns that keep arising? How do we begin to address the underlying causes? Impermanence doesn't seem to really address the arising of particular recurrent phenomena—anxiety, anger, and so forth—that themselves cause suffering simply by their very arising.

There are two different elements to the practice. We were emphasizing the element of impermanence in our discussion, but I mentioned briefly, in the context of dependent origination, that in our Vipassanā practice, our mindfulness practice, the key is not so much about preventing things from arising, but about how we're relating to them. This goes very much to that point: how do we relate to what is unpleasant?

In this case, we're talking about unpleasant emotions. For me, the predominant, deeply rooted, unpleasant emotion that came up so strongly for a very long time was fear. For whatever reason, that's what was conditioned in my mind—very unpleasant. It would often come up very strongly on retreat, so I was working with it a lot. I learned so much from it, but it took me a long time to really discover the key to release.

It points to the difference between recognition and mindfulness. I was recognizing the fear. I knew it was fear. But all the time I thought I was being mindful, I wanted it to go away. I had aversion to it because it was so unpleasant. It took me a long time, but at a certain point, something shifted. I thought: if this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay. And in that moment, that "it's okay" was the first moment I genuinely accepted it. No agenda, just: it's okay. Let me feel it.

It was amazing, because in that moment of acceptance, the whole thing—whatever the story was, whatever the energy of it—completely washed through. It doesn't mean that fear never arises again, but the relationship to it has completely shifted. The "it's okay" mantra really comes into play. Even if fear is arising, if we're not reactive to it, if it's okay—yes, it is unpleasant, we're not saying it's going to become pleasant, but it's okay to feel something unpleasant—when we're not fighting with it or struggling with it, then it washes through more easily. It's much less problematic.

All that being said, sometimes with deeply rooted conditioning, we can try to do all this and it still doesn't seem to unlock something for us. There are different modalities. Sometimes psychological investigation—a therapeutic understanding, really exploring the historical conditions in our lives that may have caused something—can be a very useful adjunct to the meditative practice. There are different approaches we can take. But from the meditative point of view, what I found was that the way I was relating to fear was the key to freeing my heart.

And there are a lot of ideas that you've shared tonight. Sometimes one hears that one should mostly be meditating and not get too caught up in one's intellect. The question is, what is the role of study and books, whether the suttas or other texts? What role has that played in your own life as a practitioner, and in what way can it be supportive?

I find it hugely supportive. I think it can have a really valuable place in our spiritual unfolding for a variety of reasons. One, as I mentioned earlier, it just expands our understanding of the Dharma. No matter how deep our practice is, we still have a very limited understanding compared to what the Buddha knew. Through study, we begin to open up to many different dimensions that we may not have even considered or understood or known about.

For example, when we were discussing the law of dependent origination—I would never have come up with that understanding through my own meditation practice. It took a Buddha mind to really understand all of those links. But through the study of it, we can apply the Buddha's great wisdom to our own practice, and it furthers it. So study opens up doorways to a much greater understanding of the Dharma, of the teachings, which we can then use in our practice. That's very significant.

Every year I do quite a long retreat, and lately, instead of reading, I listen to the Buddha's discourses on Audible. It's like having the Buddha give the Dharma talk every evening, which is quite remarkable. It's interesting because in listening, I hear things very differently. So many different things pop out that I would not have thought of, which I had not employed in my practice, but then something quite significant can open up.

Another aspect of study is that it can inspire us. Especially as lay people living in the world, we live busy lives—work, relationships, we're busy. Very often, even if we have a dedicated practice, sometimes we can lose a little inspiration. Reading those books or works that really inspire us can energize our practice again. It's a tremendous help when we feel things are flagging, when we're getting too immersed in our worldly lives. We read something and think, "Oh yes, there's something important here that I've forgotten or put on the back burner." So again, it can be a tremendous help.

*Question about holding compassion more loosely*

It's a great question, and it's something I've reflected on a lot, because it's so easy to get caught by some image of how we should be, or how some great saint acts in the world, and we feel that we never quite live up to that. I don't think that's helpful at all.

What has been most helpful for me is a phrase I've talked about a lot in different circumstances. It was the title of a book by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. I love the title of this book: *How Can I Help?* Not that I should help or not. It's just, how can I help? I feel that's like a mantra of compassion.

In different situations, if that thought or notion comes to mind—just, "Okay, in this situation, how can I help?"—sometimes there is something we can do and sometimes there isn't, but at least we're posing the question. We're opening ourselves to the possibility that there might be something we could do to help.

This frees us from having some idealistic notion of what we should be doing and then feeling we're not living up to that. Instead, in different circumstances—each one unique, the conditions different—we simply hold that question. It's a very simple one, but I find for me it just keeps that energy of responsiveness alive. How can I help?

And if there's something that comes to mind to do, then we do it. And if there isn't, then we don't, but we stay in a place of equanimity and also a certain kind of ease and connectedness—just from knowing that we considered that question, that we're relating in some way and we're open in some way to whatever the difficult situation is. We're not pretending it's not there. We're not trying to avoid it. We're considering it. And then, how can I help? And then we see what comes out of it. So it feels to me like a very easeful and natural and beautiful way of living one's life.

There's a Tibetan tradition where after a teacher teaches a text, they start at the beginning again with the understanding that at some point, either in this life or a future life, they will complete the teaching of that text with those students. And I feel that way. There was one question I really wanted to ask and a number of other questions, which were really wonderful. And leaving those questions out there, I have this feeling that perhaps in this life or another life, those questions will be posed. Well, let's aim for this life.

I wanted to end by saying a few words about what we call *dāna*. *Dāna* is a word in several classical Indian Buddhist languages that means something like generosity. And it is the first virtue of the Bodhisattva. The person who's moving along the path to awakening begins with generosity because it's both the relinquishing of that which we're attached to and simultaneously also the immediate addressing of the needs of others. It can happen in all kinds of ways. It could be relinquishing an opinion. It could be offering a gift. It could be paying attention in a particular way and being responsive to someone.

*Dāna* is also etymologically related to our word donation. And it is this practice of generosity—the practice that Joseph has had for more than fifty years of freely offering the teachings, writing those books, starting these institutions, basically an entire lifetime devoted to serving the Dharma and freely offering the infrastructure that allows teachers to be trained and other teachers to teach, and also teaching himself in this really clear and humble way.

I personally am deeply moved by this practice of *dāna* on the part of teachers—that there's a trust in the sangha, a trust in all of us, that we will support them. And especially today, where there's so much pressure to monetize everything and to make ourselves all entrepreneurs, the idea that we can have an alternative to that is precious.

If people would like to offer something, to practice generosity, we welcome it—and we welcome many other forms of generosity as well. We have volunteers who come, and we think of being responsive in your own lives, however you do so, as a practice of

*dāna*. I'm also very grateful to the many people who offered *dāna* when you registered. And I am certainly clear that if this is a time when your generosity is better expressed elsewhere, you should feel there are many ways to express it.

Thank you so much for the generosity of your attention and your questions. And now, let's close our evening with a short meditation.

Again, let's just settle back into a relaxed, easeful posture. Closing the eyes. Settling into the awareness of the whole body. Just sit and know you're sitting. And within that framework of the whole body, become aware of the body breathing. Letting it find its own natural rhythm. Inclining towards relaxation. Softening the eyes. Relaxing the shoulders. Simply sitting at ease, aware of the body, of the breath, of any thoughts or images or feelings that arise.

Maybe settling for a few moments into the heart center, that area in the center of the chest, with a feeling of benevolence, of goodwill towards all beings.

May all beings everywhere be at peace. May all live in safety and with ease.

May the energy of our practice together, our discussion together, be dedicated to the welfare and the happiness and the liberation of all beings everywhere.

Thank you all. It's always a pleasure to join together for these dharma discussions.

*Thank you for listening.*

---

CHAPTER 70

# Liberation Teachings for Daily Life

Joseph Goldstein · 1h10

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses a question that has deeply engaged his own practice in recent years: how can lay practitioners genuinely work toward liberation while living a householder's life? He acknowledges the challenge of "swimming upstream" against our conditioning toward sense pleasures, drawing on the Buddha's teaching about gratification, danger, and release from entanglement in sensory experience.*
>
> *Goldstein emphasizes sīla (ethical conduct) as the essential foundation, describing the precepts as "guide rails" that protect us from unwholesome actions and allow the mind to settle into concentration. He explains how the pleasure of samādhi surpasses ordinary sense pleasures, creating conditions for deeper insight into impermanence—what the Buddha called things "always becoming otherwise." This leads naturally to understanding dukkha (the inherently unsatisfying nature of conditioned phenomena) and ultimately anattā (not-self).*
>
> *The talk offers practical exercises for experiencing selflessness directly: noticing how often we're lost in self-referential thoughts, recognizing the feeling of "rushing" as a mindfulness bell, and meditating on the elements (earth, air, fire, water) during walking practice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching to his son Rāhula, Goldstein shows how experiencing sensations as "air element, earth element" rather than "my foot, my leg" provides an immediate taste of non-self. He concludes with Dzigar Kongtrül Rinpoche's reminder that nobody can be kinder to us than ourselves—liberation truly depends on our own efforts.*

Good evening to you all and to everyone online.

A couple of weeks ago, someone was asking me about my practice and what I was now finding most compelling in it. Of course, over the years this has changed—at different times, different aspects of the teachings would seem very compelling. But in the last couple of years, there was one thing in particular that has really grabbed my interest: the challenge of practicing for liberation in the context of a lay life.

It's challenging because practicing for liberation is like swimming upstream. It goes against so much of our conventional understanding of reality and of the way things are. What makes it a compelling question for me is that so much of the Buddha's teachings is directed to nuns and monks, monastics who are living a life of much greater renunciation than most of us do as lay people. But for many of us who are living the household

life, we still have the aspiration—the highest aspiration—for freedom, for awakening, for enlightenment. So how can we approach this? How can we work with this challenge?

In the Buddha's time and up until now, there have been many householders who have realized and attained different stages of awakening and who are firmly and deeply on the path. So the question really is: how can we find the middle way between monastic renunciation on the one hand and being ensnared in the realm of worldly pleasures? Is there a middle way that can actually guide us on the path of awakening, of liberation, of realizing our highest aspirations?

Now, we can't avoid sense experiences even if we wanted to, because obviously inhabiting a body, different sense experiences are just part of our lived reality. But how we relate to them is completely up to us. We're going to have sights and sounds and all the different sense objects coming, with their range of pleasant and unpleasant. But how we relate to their coming—that really is a result of our training in mindfulness. Can we relate to them in a way that leads to awakening rather than just ensnares us further in this entanglement of sense delights?

The Buddha gave one teaching that encapsulates this challenge. It's a very brief teaching, but it really includes a lot. He spoke of the gratification, the dangers or the downside, and the escape or release from entanglement in the various pleasures of the senses.

We're all aware of the gratification that they provide, each of us perhaps partial to some and indifferent to others. But we know just from our daily lives the happiness and the joy and the gratification when we have pleasant sense experiences. They do bring us a kind of happiness. They do bring a certain quality of delight in our lives. They may be beautiful sights that we love—maybe we're very visual. Or we love beautiful music and beautiful sounds, or delicious tastes, or wonderful aromas, or exquisitely pleasurable bodily sensations. These are all the common, ordinary experiences in our lives, and we feel a certain happiness and gratification in the experience of them. The Buddha acknowledged this. He acknowledged that the gratification is there.

But that's where most of us stop.

The Buddha went on to describe what he called the dangers or the downsides of relying on these sense pleasures for our happiness. If you think about it, to some extent—or perhaps to a large extent—that's what we're doing in our lives, in our pursuit of happiness. Very often we frame it in terms of just accumulating as many pleasurable experiences as possible as being the source of our happiness. But the Buddha pointed out that

because of their fleeting nature, they are inherently unreliable as a source of lasting fulfillment. He didn't deny that they bring us pleasure in the moment, but if we're looking for a sense of fulfillment or completion in our lives, they are not going to provide it, precisely because they're very changeable, very impermanent. And we know this. How many sense pleasures have you already enjoyed in your life? Countless. And yet you're here. So on some level, we already know that as delightful as they may be, they don't provide the essence of fulfillment or the deepest, highest kind of happiness.

Another downside—and perhaps the word danger is more appropriate for this aspect—is that in our experience of the pleasures of the world, when we experience them unmindfully, they are simply strengthening the tendency of the mind towards greed, towards wanting more. It just lands us in the cycle of always wanting more and not being satisfied, going for more, not being satisfied. The tendency in the mind, the wanting mind or the greedy mind, gets strengthened when we don't bring mindfulness to these experiences. What's really surprising is that besides strengthening the habit of wanting, we still buy into it even when the consequences are unpleasant.

I'll give you a few examples of this phenomenon, and it's quite remarkable that we keep going after things in anticipation of them bringing happiness when they actually bring us suffering—and yet we still want them.

The examples are probably endless, but what first came to mind was simply the tendency of overeating, enticed by initial desire and anticipated pleasure. We often find it difficult to simply let the desire pass, even when we know that overeating doesn't feel good. Quite quickly, it doesn't feel good. So it's quite surprising that rarely do we simply let the desire come and go, or if we do start eating, to know when to stop.

I just had a recent experience of this in Barre, on the other side of town. There's something like a farm store, quite a nice place, and they sell their own ice cream. The ice cream is really good. Their child-size portion—the smallest they serve—is already way too much. This is somewhat typical of our culture, I think, this culture of excess. And we know—I know—if I finish even that child-sized portion, it's not going to feel good afterwards. But how many of us can stop after six or seven spoonfuls of ice cream? It's hard sometimes, because that desire, the wanting for the next hit of pleasure, that next hit of sweetness, is so strong, so compelling.

Something Bart referred to last night, which I think we're all subject to and all have experience with, is indulging in the dubious pleasure of surfing the internet—where the algorithms know exactly what will seduce us, providing us with the next link to whatever it is we're wanting to look at. Do we ever stop with just clicking on one link? No. Then another, and another, and before we know it, half an hour has gone by, lost in

this dream world of the internet. This never-ending desire for completion, which never comes. It's very striking to me that even though we've all experienced this, it's very hard not to fall into that trap.

I say this just to point out why this path to awakening, to liberation, to freedom is like swimming upstream. There's strong conditioning in our minds that just wants to go after the next hit of momentary pleasure, even when we know the consequences are unpleasant. That's quite striking to me.

In one discourse, the Buddha expressed it with a wonderful phrase. He said, "Forms, sounds, tastes, odors, bodily sensations, and all mental objects—this is the terrible bait of the world." I love that phrase: the terrible bait of the world. I think of fish swimming and then biting on the bait. All of these different sense inputs are coming, and we're like fish that just keep biting on that, biting on that, biting on that. "This is the terrible bait of the world with which the world is infatuated. But when one has transcended this, the mindful disciple of the Buddha shines radiantly like the sun, having transcended Māra's realm." Māra is the embodiment of ignorance or delusion.

So the Buddha is pointing to a possible release from being entangled in the world of sense objects, sense pleasures. And again, I want to reiterate, it doesn't mean that we don't experience them, because we will. As embodied human beings, these sense experiences are going to come. But our challenge, the swimming upstream, is this: can we really see them for what they are, see them accurately, not be seduced, and then even enjoy them in the moment—but without the clinging, without the grasping, without the wanting?

This is not easy. That's why we're all here, and why it really takes practice and the cultivation of certain qualities of mind that allow for this freedom.

There's another danger in our unmindful experience of sense pleasures: these desires can often lead to very unskillful actions, which cause suffering for ourselves and suffering to others. Think of crimes of passion—people doing things driven by strong desire, strong lustful desire—or of addiction, of just basic greed for more. Think how much of the inequality in the world comes from strong greed. Our mind states have consequences not only for ourselves; they have consequences for the whole world. And we see it. We see it being played out.

So there's the acknowledged gratification—we see that and acknowledge it. There are also the dangers of this cycle of endless wanting. And then the Buddha talked about the escape, the release from these deeply ingrained patterns.

So I want to talk a little bit about the release and how to accomplish that, how to realize that for ourselves.

First, and this is something we've already touched upon, is understanding the importance of training in the precepts. In Pali, ethical behavior is called *sila*. These precepts are like the guide rails in our life's journey. Even as we're living as householders, enjoying the many pleasant experiences that come—and they do come, and we enjoy them—the precepts keep our activities within bounds. If we are really committed to following and even deepening our understanding of what the precepts really mean and how they can be applied, they act as a kind of mindfulness bell for us when we're about to do something that may be unwholesome or unskillful. They are a great protection.

Just to mention a few, which again we've discussed briefly, but to highlight their importance: we take the precept of not killing. Every being, no matter how small, wants to go on living. Can we relate to that and refrain from killing whenever possible? It usually is possible, though people do rightfully raise examples. What about killing malaria mosquitoes? Sometimes we have to weigh the consequences, weigh the options. But generally in our lives, we're not faced with such subtle choices. Generally, killing is really unnecessary. Yet it can be instinctive—the mosquito lands on your arm.

When I was in India practicing, in the summer months we would go up to the mountains and I rented these quite funky houses. The first time I went up there, there were these huge spiders on the ceiling of my bedroom. Not quite tarantulas, but big. I did not like the fact that they were there. But I was committed to following the precept. And it was quite amazing—I just surrendered. It was actually fine. They lived up on the ceiling and I was down on the floor, and we existed quite happily together. But the instinct, especially in this country or other Western countries, is to take out the spray of Raid. Something you don't like, kill it. So the precept serves as a guard for us to refrain from these unwholesome actions.

Another huge arena, which we'll probably discuss more toward the end, is the *sila* of right speech. This is a vast area of our lives. How often do we pay attention before we speak to what we're going to say? Probably not so much. I've noticed how easy it is for words to just come tumbling out. Mostly they're probably harmless, but sometimes they're not. There's an acronym that serves as a very helpful reminder—I love this one. The acronym is WAIT. It stands for: Why Am I Talking? I love it because sometimes there's no good reason.

*Sila* also frees our mind from remorse. It really allows our mind to settle. And it is the gift of fearlessness to everyone else. If we're committed to *sila*, that's basically a statement that no one need fear us. We're not going to harm anyone with our actions. That's a powerful gift to be giving to everyone we meet in our lives.

When you consider that we take the precepts at the beginning of a retreat, it's much more than a formality. It really is the bedrock of the whole path. And it allows us to settle more deeply into concentration.

When our mind is not agitated by thoughts of unskillful, unwholesome things we've done, it can settle much more easily. And the pleasure of concentration turns out to be much more pleasurable than the happiness of sense pleasures. We may think we're giving up some sort of delight, but actually, as our mind gets concentrated, we experience a kind of happiness that is much more fulfilling and more complete. It's still not enlightenment—it's not awakening—but it's a much more wholesome and deeply satisfying experience than the things we usually look for to make us happy. So sila helps us tremendously in concentration.

Sometimes when we speak about enlightenment or liberation or freedom, we can get so enthusiastic about the possibility that we just want those teachings, and we really ignore the foundation of sila. My first teacher, Munindraji, used this example. He said practicing meditation without a foundation of sila is like trying to row a boat across a river without untying it from the dock. You can put an enormous amount of effort into it, but it's not going to be successful unless we have established this foundation of sila and non-harming.

I wanted to give particular emphasis to this, and I would encourage you to actually explore in your own lives how your understanding of each of the precepts can be refined. It's its own practice. Really just look: What does not killing mean in the different circumstances of my life? What does not taking what isn't given mean? Or sexual misconduct? Explore all of the basic five precepts, including right speech.

So with sila as the foundation, we can develop different meditative techniques and skills that free the mind both in the moment but also lead onward to nibbana. Nibbana is the Pali word—nirvana is Sanskrit—which describes the highest freedom, the highest peace.

As I mentioned the first morning, in terms of meditation development, we start with calming the mind and collecting the attention through some form of concentration. Now, concentration has the power to suppress the hindrances, but it's not suppression in a bad way. It's not an unskillful suppression. Rather, when the mind is concentrated,

it simply makes the hindrances inoperative for that period of time. And when the hindrances—which we can talk about tomorrow morning and throughout the retreat—when these hindrances in the mind are in abeyance, that's when profound investigation into the nature of our experience becomes possible. Because if the mind is continually scattered, lost in thought and restless, it's impossible to see clearly.

We need a basic level of concentration, but it does not require some super-yogi amount of concentration where you're flying through the air and walking through walls—which can be done, not by me, but... We don't need those fantastic levels of what's called samadhi. But we need enough, just to have the mind be somewhat collected, somewhat calm, somewhat steady. A lot of what we do in the beginning of a retreat is simply work to establish that baseline of concentration.

As this develops, we have a deeper and more immediate experience of impermanence. The Buddha used one phrase in the texts to describe impermanence, which is very unusual, not a common English phrase. That's why it really caught my attention when I first read it. He said things are always changing, "becoming otherwise." I love that phrase—becoming otherwise. Everything, every moment, is always becoming otherwise, which is just another way of saying that things are continually changing. But I like that phrase because, at least for me, it suggests the inherent instability of experience. We think we've landed someplace, but it's always becoming otherwise.

Generally, we're not paying attention to this, even though it's happening all the time. This is the nature of how things are unfolding. But usually we're lost in mental proliferation, in our stories and our dramas—everything we're all very familiar with—and we simply overlook it. We're not paying attention to the fact that things are continually becoming otherwise. But this is what we see very clearly as the mind becomes somewhat more concentrated.

This truth of change can be seen at every level of magnitude. It's such a universal characteristic of all phenomena. Think of the birth and death of galaxies, of stars. The sun, in another four and a half billion years, is going to either collapse or explode, depending on its size. The rise and fall of civilizations. The change of climate and weather. And the momentary change of our lived experience. At whatever level we look, this becoming otherwise is continually happening.

So how can we tune into this in a very immediate and personal way, from wherever we are in the practice, even from the very beginning? There is a very simple exercise that will give us this immediate experience of how change is happening. I would sug-

gest sometimes when you're outside—it could be done any place, but I've found it most helpful outdoors—doing walking meditation or just going for a walk, and holding a very simple question in mind for maybe five minutes.

So it doesn't have to be a long extended time, although it could be. The very simple question to hold in the mind is: moment to moment, what is being known? That's all. What is being known?

When I do this while going for a walk, what is being known? Oh, a sight. The feeling of the air on my face. Touching my foot on the ground. A thought. A sound. Another sight. So quickly, if we're paying attention carefully to each moment's experience—what is being known—it will reveal to you immediately how rapidly our experience is changing. Just moment after moment, it's one thing and another thing and another thing.

We can see in some way that our meditation practice is, in part, a refinement of the perception of change. Of course, we could go up to anybody on the street and ask them, "Do things change?" And everybody would say yes. But we don't live that understanding. Because if we really, deeply, fully understood it, we would not be holding on to anything that we realize is continually changing. We do know it on some level, but in meditation practice we are immersing ourselves in this perception of change, right there in the momentary experience of it. The question I just suggested is a beginning way of tuning into that, of seeing the rapidity of this change.

Now, this direct experience of the rapidly changing nature of all our experience leads to an understanding of what in the Pali language—the language of the Buddhist texts, closely related to Sanskrit—is called *dukkha*. It's a very important word in the teachings. For those of you new to the practice, the most basic formulation of the Buddhist teachings are called the Four Noble Truths, and they all revolve around this word *dukkha*. The first noble truth is the truth of *dukkha*. The second is the cause of *dukkha*. The third is the end of *dukkha*. And the fourth is the path leading to the end of *dukkha*.

So what does *dukkha* mean? It's often translated as "suffering," and that's relatively easy for us to understand. But it has a broader meaning than that, because as the Buddha said, all conditioned things are *dukkha*. When we're having pleasant experiences, we don't experience them as suffering particularly, but they're still *dukkha*. Why? Because in its expanded meaning, we understand *dukkha* to mean the inherently unsatisfying nature of experience. And it's inherently unsatisfying because it's continually changing.

This is really important to understand. Through the development of *sīla*, we lay the foundation. From *sīla*, we develop a modicum of concentration. As the mind stabilizes a little bit, it allows us to see the momentary flow, the momentary change of every aspect of our experience. The more deeply we're immersed in that, the more deeply do we understand in our bones that these changing phenomena will never result in a lasting sense of fulfillment or completion. All of the deepest insights of the practice unfold in this very natural way.

Most people can easily understand, at least on some level—maybe a superficial level at first—but the idea of impermanence is not hard to understand. People can relate to that. And even *dukkha*: the suffering that comes in life is obvious, the painful experiences. But also, with a little thoughtfulness, we can appreciate the fact that changing phenomena will not bring lasting satisfaction.

But the most challenging aspect of the Buddha's teachings is not particularly impermanence or *dukkha*. It's the understanding of not-self, of selflessness. This really seems counterintuitive. Our whole lives have revolved around the sense of self, of "I am." And here the Buddha comes and says that's just a mistaken understanding, a mistaken view.

The Buddha summed up this understanding in one phrase found very frequently throughout the discourses—a phrase that truly encapsulates the non-self way of relating to all experience. He said that things should be seen with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

That's the understanding we need to bring to the unfolding experience of our lives. Whatever arises—a thought, a sensation, a moment of hearing—this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself. This phrase encapsulates the meaning of not-self.

But of course, the great challenge is: how do we actually experience that? It's not as obvious as the truth of impermanence or the truth of dukkha. And so, returning to what I find most intriguing these days, I'm really exploring whether there's a way in our practice as lay people—living the household life, engaged with the world—to tap into the experience of selflessness in the midst of our lives. Whether on retreat or in daily life, are there ways to gain an immediate sense, an immediate experience—even if not yet complete—of what the Buddha meant by non-self?

As I've engaged with this question, based on my own interest and exploration, I've found there are many ways to do it. I want to share some of them with you because they've been very impactful in my own practice.

One arena of practice we often overlook is mindfulness in daily activities. We give so much emphasis to sitting. Some emphasis to walking, though not quite as much as sitting. And our daily activities run a distant third. This is a huge mistake. It deprives us of an arena of practice that we can bring directly into our daily lives. You don't have to be on retreat to do it—although if you practice it here, it will be easier to continue when you're home.

The text I've shared with you begins with the word "bhikkhu." Bhikkhu is the Pali word generally for a monk, and bhikkhuni for a nun. But Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, explained that bhikkhu in its more general meaning refers to anybody walking on the path. In that sense, we're all bhikkhus. We're not monastics, but we're walking on the path.

So: "A bhikkhu is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning, when looking ahead and looking around, when bending an arm or straightening it, when eating, drinking, consuming food and tasting, when defecating and urinating, when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, when talking and keeping silent—one acts with full awareness."

I'd like you to paste this up on the door of your room, so every time you go out, you take a look at it. Just to remind you that each of these ordinary activities of our lives—the things we do every day—can be done with full awareness.

Let me share an example. One of our teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, was a Burmese monk, a very fierce and demanding teacher. He first came in 1984 for a three-month course—a very rigorous retreat. My colleague Sharon Salzberg was the queen of slow moving. It would take her an hour to cross the dining room. But it was interesting: when she would go for an interview with Sayadaw, she'd go in, do her bows, and then he'd ask, "What did you notice when you combed your hair?" She hadn't paid any attention to that. She didn't have an answer. And that was it—end of interview. The next time she goes in: "What did you notice when you were brushing your teeth?" Nothing. She didn't notice anything. He kept on like that until she was actually fulfilling this teaching.

So can we do that?

Can we pay careful attention?

You may already know the answer to this, but it was only a few years ago that I discovered it for myself. What's the predominant experience you have when brushing your teeth? You don't need to answer now, but just think of what it might be, then pay

attention and see if it's accurate. Because I was surprised—it wasn't what I thought it was. I won't say any more. You have to see for yourself. And maybe it will be different for you, but for me it was surprising.

There's one common feeling which is like a mindfulness bell telling you that you are not being mindful in your daily activities. If you keep an eye out for this feeling, it will be a tremendous help—just stopping for a moment, settling in, and re-engaging with awareness. That feeling is the feeling of rushing.

It's such a common feeling. When we're rushing, we're ahead of ourselves. We're energetically toppling forward. It's as if our mind is already where we're going or what we think we have to be doing, and we're not settled back in our bodies. We are not being mindful. But it's such an apparent feeling. If you set the intention to pay attention to when you're feeling rushed, you can just stop for a moment, recollect yourself, and then start moving at whatever speed is appropriate—because rushing has nothing to do with speed. You can be walking slowly and be rushing, and you can be walking quickly and not rushing.

You will be amazed, even here on retreat where there's all the support and suggestions for you just to be mindful of what you're doing, at how often you will find yourself rushing through the day. And it's actually very noticeable. I'll give you an example. The bell rings after breakfast for the 8:45 sitting. Notice how you and others are coming into the hall. It's like being pulled in there—not everyone, of course, but not uncommonly. It's like we're rushing to get to our seats so we can begin meditating. Why not meditate with each step?

It makes a huge difference, and you will feel so much more fulfilled, really. It's such a more easeful and relaxed way of moving when we're settled back into our bodies and really mindful of each step, each movement. There's a line from a short story by James Joyce—I think it's from *Dubliners*. The line is: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." We spend a good part of the day living a short distance from our bodies. So pay attention. It will be of tremendous help in your practice and also in living in a much more satisfying way.

There are a couple more exercises that we can do to actually touch into the experience of non-self, of selflessness, in the midst of daily activities—and in that I'm including also the walking, because I've learned a lot in the walking about how to explore this teaching. In Pali, the word for selflessness or not-self is *anattā*. It's possible at any stage in the practice to really get some glimpses of what the Buddha is talking about.

One of the easiest places to see how the sense of self is being conditioned is by paying attention to how often we're lost in thoughts of past and future. I think you'll notice that most of the thoughts of past and future—guess who's the star of the show? We are the subject of most of those thoughts. They're completely normal thoughts. We all have these thoughts of what we were doing in the past, what we hope to be doing in the future. Totally common and natural. And just as thoughts, conventionally speaking, they're fine. But we're missing the fact that unless we really understand them as being just thoughts, we are unconsciously strengthening this sense of being the subject, of the "I" in the center of it all. So it's just to watch that, to pay attention to that.

Part of this exercise—and this was tremendously illuminating for me—was seeing, especially in the daily activities and in the walking, how often I was lost in unnoticed thoughts. Brief ones, not problematic, not dramatic. They didn't cause any agitation, just the usual random thoughts that go through the mind. But at one point I was on a self-retreat, going for a walk, and for some reason I just started noticing how frequently that was happening. I'd take some steps and then just be lost in a thought for—it could be five seconds or ten seconds or fifteen seconds.

But they didn't really register because they weren't problematic. There was no big drama or anything. But as I just said, most of these thoughts had the "I" as a subject.

It's really illuminating for each of us to see how frequently this is happening, because mostly we're not aware of it. And the more we begin paying attention to the fact that this is happening a lot, it makes us a little more wakeful in the experience, and we become a little more quickly aware that these thoughts are there and not so lost in them.

There's another exercise that takes us to an even more profound level of understanding selflessness. And it's something that can be realized doing anything, any kind of activity at any moment.

For example, in walking, even as we're being mindful of the movement—we're walking and we're feeling the movement, we're feeling the touch—in this situation, we're not lost in our thoughts. We're really there. But very frequently, there is a subtle overlay, and it can be really subtle, of some image or idea of foot or leg or body as we're walking. We're feeling the sensation, so it's not that we're disconnected from that, but it's like a translucent image that gets overlaid on the direct experience. It's a concept of foot or leg or body.

Now the problem with not seeing that—and it takes real effort to see; it's not easy, you really have to have an intention to explore this—is that it's such an easy step to go from foot or leg or body to *my* foot and *my* leg and *my* body. This just happens automatically. This is how we think. A foot and leg and body—don't you have one? Yeah, it's my foot and my leg and my body, not even realized. And in a conventional way, of course, it's totally okay. But for the purpose of awakening and for the purpose of liberation, this is what imprisons us in a world of concept and the world of self. I, me, mine.

The Buddha addressed this tendency in a discourse to his son, Rahula. There's a very interesting story. The Buddha was going for alms round into the village, and his son Rahula, who was at that time a novice monk, was walking behind him. Rahula, looking ahead to the Buddha—and the Buddha was said to embody physical perfection, great beauty of form—was reflecting, "Oh yes, I'm the son of the Buddha, and I'm somewhat similar." He was having a little pride. Needless to say, the Buddha knew what was going on in his mind and turned around. And he gave him a teaching to counteract that tendency.

The teaching he gave, which I'll go into in some detail because it's something we can apply for ourselves, was on meditating on the elements. It's easy to skip over these teachings because the language and framework that the Buddha used can seem a bit theoretical and even archaic, since it's not the language we use. What was common at the time was describing the elements in terms of earth, air, fire, and water as the four primary elements. To us, this may seem overly simplistic, given our understanding of chemistry and physics. When we hear of the elements earth, air, fire, water, we might tend to dismiss it as not being so relevant to us.

But really, those terms are simply a designation for the actual sensations that we're feeling. It's a whole different use of the term "element" than the periodic table in chemistry. It wouldn't help us so much to say, "Be mindful of carbon as you walk," or "Be mindful of hydrogen." That wouldn't be much help to us.

But if we understand what the Buddha meant by earth, air, fire, and water—earth is just the experience of hardness or softness; air is movement and vibration, pressure; fire is warmth and coolness; water is fluidity, cohesion—when we understand what these terms refer to, they provide us a very direct connection to what we're actually feeling, free of concepts.

So when we're experiencing the body in terms of the elements, we're not getting caught in the overlay of foot or leg or body. It's a very simple exercise, and it has the potential—

to be quite profound even though it's incredibly simple.

In your next walking meditation, or even just walking from one place to another, the two elements that are predominant in walking are the air element—movement—and the earth element—touch.

Some time ago, and this is fairly recent for me as I didn't really use this earlier in my practice, but in the last number of years I really saw how powerful it was. I simply started noting in the walking for a while: "air element" as I was moving, "earth element" as I touched. Air element, earth element. And then perhaps just "air, earth, air, earth."

Now the key is not just repeating the words in your mind. You have to connect the word to what you're actually experiencing in the movement and the touch. But the value of experiencing it in terms of these elements is that it's very unlikely the mind would go from "air element" to "my air element," or from "earth element" to "my earth element." We would not tend to do that as we would with foot—"my foot"—or leg—"my leg."

So when we're directly experiencing just the basic elements of what is happening, there can be quite a vivid experience of: that's all there is. And it gives us a taste, a glimpse. It's a taste of what selflessness means. It's not I, me, mine. It's just the very experience we're having of walking—a common experience. But we've dropped down into the level of the selfless experience of it. Just air element, earth element. Air, earth.

Does this seem clear? It's really simple, but it's dramatic because we're not used to dropping beneath the level of concepts. We live most of our lives in the world of our mental proliferation.

One last piece. The experience of the elements not only illuminates the truth of impermanence, because it's always changing, but it also illuminates another aspect of anattā, selflessness—which means that things are ungovernable, not subject to our will. Everything is happening according to certain laws. You could put the kettle on the stove and wish, "May the water boil, may the water boil." No, you have to turn on the flame. It's going to follow its own laws. And everything is following its own laws.

When we understand the laws governing phenomena and we're in harmony with them, then we can guide things in a certain way. But it's not because we want it to be that way. It's because we understand the laws that make certain things happen. This is an important understanding of selflessness, of non-self—the ungovernableness—because the elements are continually becoming otherwise, and sometimes in ways that we don't like. Growing older, getting ill, dying, death. This is not what we would look for,

but it's not under our control. The elements of the body and of the mind and of the whole world are following their own laws. These are some of the laws of nature—that things have the nature to grow old, to get sick, and to die.

Seeing the elements in this way and appreciating that they are following their own laws again highlights their selfless nature, that they're not subject to our will. This in turn leads to a deepening understanding of dukkha, because things are ungovernable.

My favorite description of dukkha—I just came across it recently, someone had written it, and I thought, "That captures it." They defined dukkha as the inevitability of unwanted experiences. I love it because it is so true. We don't like to acknowledge it. It is inevitable because things are always becoming otherwise and following their own laws.

Do you see how all of this ties together? This is what's so beautiful about the Buddhist teachings. They're just so consistent. Every aspect of it—the understanding of impermanence leads to an understanding of dukkha. The understanding of both leads to an understanding of selflessness, not-self. As we understand not-self, it increases our understanding of impermanence. It's just this flowering of insight and understanding which leads to the highest peace, the highest happiness—what the Buddha spoke of as the experience of Nibbāna, the freedom of the mind, the mind basically free of greed and hatred and delusion.

I want to close with a teaching from a Tibetan teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. He said: "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your own mind and experience."

From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself.

The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path to liberation. Now liberation depends on you."

This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you.

So that's what we're doing here together. We're really embarking on this path—this path of freedom, this path of peace.

*Let's just sit for a couple of minutes.*

May our practice be dedicated to the welfare and happiness and liberation of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 71

# Questions and Responses

Joseph Goldstein · 1h02

> *In this engaging question-and-answer session, Joseph Goldstein draws from fifty years of practice to address fundamental questions about the path of awakening. He reflects on how practice has transformed his mind over the decades, describing enlightenment as a process of 'lightening up'—becoming less self-obsessed and holding experiences with greater spaciousness and ease.*
>
> *Goldstein shares pivotal corrections from his teachers, including Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's deceptively simple instruction to 'be more mindful' and the warning against attachment to subtle meditative states. He emphasizes practicing in a relaxed but not casual way, cultivating intimacy with moment-to-moment experience rather than remaining 'more or less mindful.' The teaching that we are 100% responsible for our suffering—not for what happens to us, but for how our minds hold it—emerges as a powerful framework for understanding agency on the path.*
>
> *Addressing questions about anattā (not-self), Goldstein uses the Big Dipper analogy to illuminate how self is a useful concept designating a pattern of mind-body elements, but not an ultimate reality. He clarifies that realizing selflessness doesn't eliminate anything—it simply reveals what was always true. For practitioners wondering about compatibility with modern life, he points to the universality of the six sense bases as described in the Buddha's discourse on 'the All,' reminding us that regardless of era or culture, experience consists only of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and mental phenomena. The session concludes with reflections on karma and rebirth, and the importance of staying embodied even amid excitement.*

So welcome to everybody here and welcome to the online folks. We're going to have about an hour or so worth of questions, maybe shy a little of that. Joseph has not seen these questions—we've had careful conspiracy among the staff and teachers to conceal this from him. Obviously we got lots and lots of questions and it's not possible to have all of them answered, but there have been certain repetitive themes, so we've drawn some from both the online submissions and from the submissions of you folks here.

So are you ready, Joseph?

It feels like a quiz show.

It is a quiz show.

**First Question:** As you know, someone once asked Dipa Ma, "What is it like in your mind?" And she said something like, "Mindfulness and compassion." After fifty years of practice, what is it like in your mind? What do we have to, quote unquote, look forward to? Do you feel you've experienced something to make you confident that there is such a thing as enlightenment? Sometimes I have doubts about plunging all the way in, the fear that this idea of enlightenment is not real. From your experience or that of your teachers, can you share what would make us confident that there is such a thing as enlightenment, or even stages of enlightenment?

One of the problems with multiple part questions is the third part pushes out the first. So what my mind is... Describe what your mind is like compared to Dipa Ma. Hard to tell the difference.

There are a couple of things that come to mind just in the moment. When I look back both to the early times of my practice and also over all the years of teaching, the way I most like to characterize the path of enlightenment is as lightening up—that we just lighten up. We don't take ourselves quite so seriously.

I've really experienced that over these many years, both in how I approach my practice, having been through so many ups and downs, even up until now. It's not like a unidirectional path upwards—it's up and down and up and down. Sometimes the mind is more concentrated and sometimes less. But whereas that used to be upsetting, or I would be concerned, now it's just held very lightly.

Also in the teaching—I don't know whether you experience it or not, especially those of you who have been here in the early years—but I used to be more serious in the teaching. Maybe it's age and maybe it's actually some progress along the path, but there's a lot more space now. Space to play and space to be relaxed and space to connect. So that's a major shift that I've seen, and I think it's probably true of everybody as they walk along the path. We just become less self-obsessed.

The correlation of not being so self-obsessed is taking interest in what's going on in our minds and bodies. Instead of having it all revolve around an "I" or a "me" and "how am I doing," it's just an interest in what's going on in my mind. One of the things that has helped me so much over all these years is when my mind is in some kind of disturbance or suffering about one thing or another, the suffering, the experience of dukkha, really peaks my interest. It's like, if my mind is suffering, I'm really interested to understand why.

This is an expression of a teaching that, for some people, is hard to hear. For me, it's powerful. I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita on retreat—he's a very demanding teacher—and in one of the Dharma talks, he said something which just made me sit up straight. He said, "We are one hundred percent responsible for our suffering. One hundred percent."

That's not to say that we're responsible for everything that happens to us, and lots of terrible things can happen. So it's not about that. But how our mind relates to what's happening—that's completely up to us. We can either drown in it, we can be putting the blame on other people.

We can do all kinds of things in relationship to the suffering that's in our minds. But that understanding—that we are 100% responsible for how our minds are holding whatever the circumstances of our lives are—is also to acknowledge that sometimes the circumstances are really difficult and challenging, and sometimes the circumstances need addressing. So it's not about any of that. It's about how we are holding it in ourselves. And we can either hold it in a place of freedom, of understanding, of interest, of wanting to understand what our minds are doing—or not.

For me, that teaching is so powerful because it gives us agency. If we think that someone else is responsible for our suffering, we've turned over all the power. Then it's just up to them whether we continue suffering or not. But when we take responsibility for that, it is empowering to understand. Because we can do something about it.

This is all part of how my mind tries to relate to things.

*Is there another part? Yes.*

This is related: What was the most beneficial correction a teacher ever gave you about your practice or your understanding?

There have been so many. But as I'm thinking back, two come to mind.

The first one, on the surface, is not going to seem so profound, but it actually was really profound. I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita in Nepal, and the conditions were terrible. Everything. The food wasn't good, there were five of us kind of on a cement floor—each with our little pads—and it was noisy, and our room was right next to the latrine. So it was just all the conditions. Talk about having the thought, *What am I doing here?*

My mind was just complaining a lot to myself. So I go into Sayadaw and I tell him what's going on, and he said, "Be more mindful."

And I thought, *Thanks a lot.* Here I'm listing this whole litany of things that are wrong with this place, and all he's telling me is to be more mindful.

However, I left the interview. I went out and did some walking. And I thought, *Well, this is a great teacher. He said be more mindful. Why don't I try it?* And so in the walking, I actually began to feel the movement and the touch much more closely.

This ties into a frame for practice that I think is useful for people to hold: that we want to practice in a relaxed way, but not a casual way. And very often—very often—we're practicing casually. It's a mind state that I call *more or less mindful.* We're kind of there. We're not totally lost. We're there, kind of. But not closely there, not really feeling whatever's going on closely and intimately, fully.

It was amazing. Within a few steps of dropping into that level of attention, all of that mental proliferation completely fell away. And it was such an interesting, simple reminder both of the power of mindfulness—a real deep connection to what's happening in the moment—and how it can take us out of all of the mental restlessness and proliferation. And it's not hard to do. It's hard to remember to do.

So that really was very useful. And to this day, when I feel my mind getting a little caught up, I come back to that instruction.

This corrective would be particularly valuable now. I don't know—did you notice? I'm sure you did notice the energy in the room. Understandably. And it just felt collectively we were getting disembodied, you know? We can practice with that.

This is the correct approach. We can actually be more mindful and deal with whatever we have to deal with. But are we in our bodies, connected? Or is the energy carrying us up and out? So it's a very powerful teaching, even though it's incredibly simple—just to be more mindful, but closely, and not with force. It's like practicing with a feeling of intimacy with what's going on.

Everything can become an hour-long dharma talk, so let me just share this briefly. One time I was walking with my teacher, Munindraji, in Bodh Gaya, where I had been practicing in India. We were walking around the village, and he said something which at the time I felt was really hokey. I didn't have any appreciation for it at all. He said, "Joseph, you know, I'm never lonely. I'm friends with the clouds. I'm friends with the grass. I'm friends with the trees." And I was young, in my early twenties. It didn't really resonate.

However, as I've practiced over all these years, I've found it is exactly true. When we're mindful in the way I was just describing, there is that intimacy of connection with the breath, with the step, with the sound, with the feeling of the air on the skin. In that sense, loneliness doesn't make sense because there's always some intimate experience happening. And it really is fulfilling. It brings a sense of completion. I've truly felt that.

The other corrective came when I had been in Burma for quite a while. My practice really felt like it was going to deeper and deeper places. I was seeing things in such minute detail—it was amazing to me how I was seeing things. I went in to see Sayadaw and described my experience, thinking he was going to pat me on the back. All he said was, "You're too attached to subtlety."

It was really powerful because I hadn't even realized there was an attachment. I was thinking, "Oh, this is great. I'm seeing so much." But the practice of liberation is about not clinging to anything. We can get so caught up in an idea of what the practice is, or what we want to be happening, and then when it does happen, we get really enthusiastic. We forget that it's about not holding on to anything—letting all that happen as it does, but without getting attached to even these very deep meditative states or blissful states, because it's all just part of the passing show.

That was a good reminder for me at that time. It was really helpful. I could just settle back and not be so caught up. And then the practice continues to unfold. So those are the two correctives that come to mind.

I want to go back to that enlightenment question. It's definitely possible—at least the different stages of awakening, and particularly the first stage or the second stage. Many people have experienced that. Many lay people who come to practice, just like we have. It takes a steadiness of practice and a commitment, and often it takes a period of lengthy practice, but it's definitely possible. It's not impossible. It's not some myth, and it's not out of the range of possibility for any of us.

The higher stages of awakening really require very particular strengths of mind. The concentration has to be very strong, along with the other factors of enlightenment. But the first couple of stages don't have that level of requirement to experience. I would really encourage you to hold that as a possibility.

The Buddha said that from that first stage of awakening—in this tradition it's called stream entry, like we're entering the stream of enlightenment—from that point on, one is destined. There's no going back from that place.

So it's a powerful turning point in one's path. And I think it's beautiful to have that aspiration and then let things unfold as they do. It may take a short time. It may take a long time. As one of my teachers said, in the spiritual path, time is not a factor. So we can just let go of that, but really have the pole star of awakening setting our direction and inspiring us. This is really possible.

*Question: This is related to practice and your interactions with your teachers. What was the most supportive or useful question you ever asked one of your teachers?*

You know, I can't remember yesterday. I'll let that settle, but nothing is particularly coming to mind.

*Question: What's your best advice for staying interested when you're concentrated? I often get concentrated and don't know what to do with myself.*

I think this points to something that is often overlooked—not overlooked completely, but not emphasized as much. We're very good at highlighting the hindrances and the negative mind states, but being mindful of the wholesome mind states, being mindful of the factors of enlightenment—this deserves equal attention. In the same way we are mindful, hopefully, of aversion or greed or sleepiness, we can have that same quality of interested mindfulness when the mind is very still, when it's calm, when there's equanimity.

These states should be recognized and really experienced mindfully so we know, "Oh, this is what calm is like. Concentration is like this. Equanimity is like this." Occasionally, even though from the perspective of non-distractedness it may not be necessary, when the mind is concentrated, periodically just dropping in a note—"concentration," "stillness," whatever word best describes your experience—can be a support for staying interested in the state.

Now, I'm describing this in terms of the concentration that comes in the course of Vipassana practice. In terms of samadhi practices, concentration practices that we may be doing regularly leading to jhana and absorption in very deep states—reflection is not helpful for that. But in Vipassana, keeping that interest and the non-identification with it, that's another aspect or benefit of the noting at that time. Because it could be easy to become identified and attached to the concentration. Just by dropping in a note, we're acknowledging the state while being mindful of it. I think that's a really helpful thing to do.

*Question: If there is no self, and this no-self has no direct control over the elements of reality, what then is liberated and how? What are those countless beings we want to liberate, including ourselves, if we are just a clockwork succession of interactions between elements over which we have no direct control?*

A couple of things here. The Buddha expressed so simply what the path is about and what's really the underpinning of our whole practice. He said that he teaches just one thing: he teaches suffering and the end of suffering. That's what all of this is about. In the context of the Buddha's teachings, it's to see the suffering that arises in the mind, to understand its causes, and to see that we can do something about those causes if we understand them.

To say that we don't have control over the elements, or as I described anatta, one meaning of it is being ungovernable—it's ungovernable in the sense that situations are not completely subject to our will. It's not that because we want something to happen it happens necessarily. Things happen when we are in harmony with and understand the causes and conditions necessary for something to occur.

This is the beauty of the Buddhist teachings. I would like to ask the Buddha, "Well, what's your mind like?" Because from the teachings, it's just amazing how he was able to see so precisely and so clearly what factors—what impersonal factors of mind that don't belong to anybody—are causes of suffering.

He could see what factors of mind just lead to more suffering—like greed, like anger, like delusion. And he could see what factors, what impersonal factors of mind, lead to awakening.

One of the factors of mind is wisdom. It's also an impersonal factor in the mind. Wisdom has two sides to it: one is the investigative side, and one is realizing the truth of what we're investigating. But that wisdom factor is also impersonal. We don't have to claim it as "I"—we just have to understand, "Oh yes, this factor, when it's developed, will lead to certain things. This factor, if it's strong, will lead to other things." So it's all working, and we can not control, but perhaps a good word is *guide*. We can guide the unfolding. But again, it's not because we're willing it to be that way. The guidance can come from our understanding the conditions necessary for the outcome that we desire.

I'm thinking of an example. I don't know if it's apt for this question, but I'll put it out since I've been using it for the last fifty years.

You go outside at night. You look up at the sky—clear sky. You know the constellation, the Big Dipper? Easy to see. Okay, this is kind of a final exam for the retreat now: Is there really a Big Dipper up in the sky?

No. The Big Dipper is totally a concept. We see a certain pattern and we give a name to the pattern. The name is "the Big Dipper." But it's just a pattern of stars. And the pattern is useful because, as I learned, you can use the Big Dipper to find the North Star. So if you're in the middle of the ocean and you need to navigate, look for the Big Dipper. However, there's no Big Dipper.

But try going out at night and looking up and *not* seeing the Big Dipper. It's really hard, because we are so conditioned to see in a certain way, to see the pattern.

Now here's the punchline: When we realize that there's really no Big Dipper, that it's just a concept, does anything at all change in the sky? No. The sky is just as it always was. It's just we're seeing it in a different way. We're no longer compartmentalizing or separating out this group of stars from all the others based on a concept. We're seeing in a much more complete and total way what's there. And what's there can be understood in terms of the laws of physics and astronomy—things are not happening randomly, things are happening lawfully. We don't need the Big Dipper for us to understand that.

Self is just like the Big Dipper. It's not there in the first place. However, we create the concept because there is a pattern of mind-body elements, just like the pattern of stars. There is a pattern. So when we look in the mirror, there's Joseph. But not really. It's really just seeing.

We don't need the sense of self to experience how things have always been. When we realize selflessness, it's not getting rid of anything. It's not like we're getting rid of a self that was there—it's not there in the first place. We're just using the word "self" as a designation for the pattern. That's how the word is used when it's used with wisdom. And we can use that language—I and you and me and other. In certain situations, that's the level we're operating on, and that's totally fine. It would be very awkward to start saying, "Can these five aggregates call your five aggregates for a date?" Very awkward. So we can use conventional language. That's not the issue.

But how do we understand the fundamental reality of what this is? And that's what this whole practice is about. It's dropping out of our confusion or delusion of thinking that the concept is the reality.

Is this clear? The self is a useful concept, and it is just a designation for the pattern of mind-body elements that are unfolding lawfully. It's not chaotic and it's not arbitrary. It's following certain laws, which is why there is a pattern. We can see that. But we don't want to confuse that then with the belief, "Well, there's some unchanging me who's understanding it all."

I talked about this in some of the groups just as a visual to express this. Generally in our lives, we're going through life with all experience coming like this—all coming back to the "me." I'm the one knowing, I'm the one feeling, I'm the one seeing. So it's all right back to me.

With practice and with a gradually growing understanding and experience of selflessness, we go from this to this. Everything is still there. All the experiences of our lives are still just as they always were. But instead of our minds doing that with everything—basically identifying in one way or another with something, even if it's just the knowing of everything—instead of that, we simply are with things as they are. Without that additional self-referential tendency.

And that's what we learn. That's what we're learning in the practice: to be letting go of that self-referential quality. And it's not easy because it's so deeply conditioned, which is why we're doing what we do. It really takes practice to begin to shift the way we're seeing things.

And again, it doesn't mean that we don't also at times operate on the conventional level, because we do, and even most of the time. But do we do it understanding that, yes, this is just conventional reality, but it does not reflect the truth of things?

The value of beginning to see things in alignment with how things actually are is expressed by one Sri Lankan monk: "No self, no problem." The self—this concept of self and I—we have loaded so much on it, and so much of our suffering comes from this deep belief that there's a "me" engaged in all kinds of things that cause problems. So it's really freeing. It's very liberating.

A question: "Practicing in this manner is a profound privilege and seems fundamentally incompatible with modern life. Where am I wrong? In what ways is deep mindfulness practice compatible with modernity as experienced by many, particularly in the Western world?"

This is a very simple question. The Buddha gave one discourse which he called the All. And in this discourse, he described the totality of our experience in six phrases. That's pretty good.

So what is the all of our experience? The eye and visible objects, the ear and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, the body and physical sensations, the mind and mind objects—thoughts, images, emotions. Is there anybody who experiences something other than one of those six things? The Buddha challenged us, saying if you experience something other than that, please tell me.

Nothing. It's amazing. We think our lives are so complicated and so confused in the modern world, in the ancient world. At any point in time, there are only these six things happening. It's a sight, it's a sound, it's a smell, it's a taste, it's a sensation, it's something going on in our minds.

I like to think of our lives and the unfolding of our lives as a six-piece chamber orchestra. It's just playing the music—the music of sights and sounds and smells and sensations and thoughts. So can we appreciate the music? It's the same. It doesn't matter what the culture is. It's universal. Universal across cultures, across time. These are the elements, the basic elements of our experience.

And practice is paying attention to that. It's just what you've been doing.

It's being mindful of seeing, mindful of hearing, mindful of sensation, mindfulness of a thought or an emotion. So the practice is really simple. And much of the time we're not experiencing taste, and maybe not even so many smells. So it's really only four things that are going on.

So what's the problem? It's just that we get caught up in the concepts, which is a mental phenomenon. We get caught up in the concepts about what's going on, and we create these huge life stories and dramas, and we lose touch with just these basic elements.

Now again, I'm not suggesting that the stories of our lives are not important. This is the conventional level of reality. Our relationships and our work and the world and the state of the world—all of that is really important. And we have to respond. But what's the place we're responding from? Are we responding from a place of deeper wisdom, or are we just totally caught up in the story?

It's understanding the simplicity of this which is why I was really encouraging right from the beginning, and with that handout for daily activities—we can have really deep practice in the midst of our daily lives, doing whatever we're doing, if we drop into the level of those six things. And then when we need to engage the mind in concepts, we do. Using the conceptual level when it's appropriate is appropriate.

As I was saying in one of the groups, if you try to read a book mindfully—mindfully in the sense that we're doing here—you can just start seeing black on white. The words are not going to have any meaning. So there are many times in our lives where we need to engage on the conceptual level, and that's totally fine.

Munindra, my first teacher, said that in those situations, which is a lot of our lives, the kind of mindfulness we need is not this really pinpoint moment-to-moment attention. It's more what he called a kind of general mindfulness, a background of mindfulness. We're doing what we're doing, we're engaged, fully engaged, but there's enough awareness that it will pick up if the mind becomes unwholesome as we're in the midst of whatever the engagement is.

So that's enough, and that's the way to practice in the world. When we don't need the conceptual mind, we should be really watchful for all the stories that are going on, really see them as thoughts. When we're engaged in a situation that does need the conceptual mind, then we enter into it and use that faculty of mind, which is a lot—this is a big part of our lives. But can we keep that general mindfulness so we're not just totally subsumed by whatever the concepts are?

So I think it doesn't have to do with this modern time or ancient time. It's the same practice, the same understanding. And we can do it.

*When noting, my labeling is too slow for how quickly my experience and awareness changes. How should I approach this?*

That's actually a good sign in practice. As I've said a few times, one of the developments of practice is an increasing refinement of the perception of change. We're seeing change at first maybe in big blocks, and then the blocks get a little smaller. At times when the concentration is steady and the mindfulness is strong, we're seeing impermanence just very rapidly—arising and passing, arising and passing very, very quickly.

So obviously at that time the noting is going to be much too slow. You can do one of two things. Either drop the noting, because in that situation it is a sign that the mindfulness is already pretty strong and you might not need the noting at that time. Or you could just drop in notes periodically—maybe every tenth thing or every twentieth thing. You're going along, just with the flow, and then drop in a note. Then a little later, drop in a note. Either way would be fine. But it's actually a good sign when we're really seeing things change with that rapidity.

*In practicing, or in any intimate relationship, we attune to others' emotional states as part of caring for and communicating with them. How do we attune without getting too entangled with their emotions, mindfully and with mettā?*

This actually came up—I think it was today's group we were speaking about it. One of the most overlooked parts of our practice, and it's really the fault of the teachers because we generally don't emphasize it, although whenever I do speak about it, I wonder why we don't, because it's really important.

And that is being mindful of seeing.

You know, for people with eyes that are in good working order, seeing is probably the predominant sense experience. We're basically walking through a world of what is being seen, and then all the reactions to it and responses to it. Seeing is a tremendously important part of our lived experience, and yet it's very rare that we actually become mindful that we're seeing. When seeing is arising, we're most likely lost in what is being seen. We're not mindful that we're seeing.

So this is one of the things I would recommend, both for those staying for a couple more days and those leaving. It's always with us, all around, and it doesn't take any effort at all. We don't have to look for an object to see—it's just always there. Just practice, even for short periods of time, stopping and noting: seeing, seeing, seeing. Because just that changes the relationship to what is being seen.

This relates to a particular story. Years ago, in the very early years of teaching, there was one meditator who came often, who for whatever reason had the most abrasive personality—aggressive and abrasive, difficult. And I was a new teacher. They'd come in for an interview, and I would try to make some space. It was challenging because the energy was coming at me. So this went on for quite a while.

And then in one interview, something shifted in my mind. I just really looked at them. I really looked. I was seeing. And when I looked at their face, the suffering was so obvious. Because what causes that kind of difficult behavior or personality? There's some kind of suffering going on, and that's being expressed in that way. But normally we're so reactive to the behavior and to the personality—as I had been. I would just be reactive and try to protect myself and all that. But when I could just see and see the suffering, instantaneously feelings of compassion arose, and a whole wonderful relationship ensued. I really enjoyed the meetings. We talked. And it all came from seeing.

When I was so caught up in my own reactivity, I was not seeing. I was just reacting. That's with a particular kind of visual expression, but the visual cues for how people are feeling—they're pretty obvious if we look. We can see when people are happy or joyful or angry or afraid or whatever it is. We just have to see. This has been a powerful thing for me, so I would recommend practicing that. I think it is a way to connect deeply with what another person is feeling without being subsumed by it, because the mindfulness of seeing gives us that place of balance within ourselves. We're seeing and open to it, but not lost in it.

Is this clear? That was really a powerful moment for me, to see what a rich possibility exists for compassion to arise, or love to arise, or whatever our emotional response might be.

Another question: How does open awareness help concentration? It seems like jumping from one thing to the next would dilute it.

So when I was a kid, I lived up in the country, a really small town. But I had relatives who lived in Jersey, you know, the suburbs. They lived a few blocks away from a busy highway, and I don't know why that should be fascinating, but coming from a small town, I just used to like to go and watch all the traffic. This was before iPhones—in those days, that's what we did for entertainment. But I learned a really big lesson in doing that.

You're by the side of a road and all this traffic is going by. There are two ways you might approach that if you want to really see every vehicle that's passing. One way is to track each car as it comes—following it with your eyes as it moves past. The other way is to keep the eyes totally steady and let everything pass through your field of vision, letting the vehicles cross your gaze. I kept my eyes completely still, and everything was just passing by, and I saw every single one.

So, I think there's an analogy here. The continuity of mindfulness of changing objects means that in each moment the mind is steady. The objects are changing, but the steadiness can be there. It's not that we have to be jumping from one to the other. It's not a jumping thing. It's steady, just being aware of whatever's presenting itself moment after moment.

And this develops what is called momentary concentration, because it's not concentration on a fixed object—it's concentration on a changing object. But concentration means steadiness. It means the mind is not flickering, not looking here, looking there. It's steady. So it's simply a question of whether it's steady on one object or steady on a flow of objects.

When you're practicing in that open awareness, we can rest in the steadiness of just being there mindfully in a receptive mode. We're not going out to the object. We're just receptive and let all the objects pass by. So it can be very steady and very relaxing.

*Question from audience member: Being of the same generation as you, death is an ever-present reality, and not in a bad way. Do you personally believe in karma and reincarnation?*

I do, but I would like to distinguish the belief in it, or the tendency to believe in it, from claiming "I know." Some people, through meditative attainment, can see—there are techniques for how to review past lives and other realms of existence. Dipa Ma was extraordinary in this way; she had all kinds of spiritual attainments. But even people with lesser attainment than that can develop this ability. I do not have them myself.

I did not start with this belief. I grew up, like most of you, in this culture. I studied Western philosophy at college. I had no idea about karma and rebirth or anything like that. But over the years, there were a few significant points that made me become more open and inclined to believe it, which I do.

One was simply that it is very much part of the Buddhist teachings. When you read the discourses, it's on almost every page. So at a certain point, when I could confirm so much of what the Buddha said in my own experience, it made me think, well, if he was right about all this, maybe he's right about this too. That was the beginning of an opening.

Then I met Dipa Ma, who had the ability to really see for herself all of this. Again, that's not proof, but I had no reason—there was not even any feeling in myself—to doubt what she was saying, because she said she experienced this. So I believed her. And it is right out of the texts, the formula for how to accomplish this, if people really want to commit to that. So that was another piece.

And so many, almost all of the great teachers in the Buddhist tradition—this is just an integral part of their understanding. With many of them, it does come from their personal experience. So that was another piece.

The third piece was that in the course of my practice, I really, at a certain point, began to experience in a certain way the immaterial nature of awareness, of consciousness. It's not a material phenomenon, and so it's not really located anyplace, because location has to do with physical phenomena, material phenomena. When I got a much more expansive understanding of the nature of awareness, the nature of consciousness, and saw that it's not necessarily tied to physical phenomena—that it's a distinct phenomenon—that again opened my mind. Well, yes, lots of things can be possible here.

So it was all these things, just little pieces that led me, as I say, to this inclination to believe. And if it's not true, so what? That's how I hold it.

Can I ask a question? So if this does not seem likely or possible to an individual who's a practitioner, is the removal of provisional confidence in this a deal-breaker in terms of their practice and its development?

Good question, and not at all.

Munindraji, my first teacher, used to love talking about the deva worlds, the heavenly realms. In the Buddhist cosmology, there are all these realms of existence, and lots of things are going on in this mysterious universe that we are simply not attuned to. Perhaps you could think of it as wavelength frequencies—where we can see or experience certain wavelengths while remaining completely oblivious to others. So it's not hard for me to imagine that there are things going on at different frequencies that are just outside of our usual sensory capability. That's not hard for me to picture.

Munindraji used to love speaking about these things. He trained Dipa Ma in how to do all this—seeing all these realms. So he would talk about it a lot, talk about the deva world, and I loved it. For whatever reason, I just really loved hearing about it.

But he would always say, "You don't have to believe this in order to practice, in order to become awakened. This is not a necessary component of enlightenment at all." So he would say, "You don't have to believe it. It's true, but you don't have to believe it." That was always how he ended.

Great. Well, thank you, Joseph. That brings us to the end of our time.

So can we just sit for a minute and let that settle?

May offering and hearing the Dharma in this way be a cause and condition for our own awakening and that of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 72

# Understanding Karma

Joseph Goldstein · 1h11

> *In this comprehensive teaching, Joseph Goldstein offers a deep exploration of the law of karma (kamma vipāka) and its practical application in daily life. Drawing from the opening verses of the Dhammapada, he establishes the foundational Buddhist understanding that mind is the forerunner of all actions—wholesome states lead to happiness, unwholesome states to suffering.*
>
> *Goldstein examines the technical aspects of how karma functions, explaining that volition (cetanā) is the karmic force containing the power to bring future results, while motivation determines what those results will be. He outlines the three unwholesome roots—greed, hatred, and delusion—and their wholesome counterparts: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. The talk addresses the subtle nature of motivation, using personal examples to illustrate how even seemingly generous acts can be mixed with expectation or other unwholesome factors.*
>
> *A significant portion addresses how to integrate understanding of karma with insight into emptiness (suññatā) and selflessness (anattā). Goldstein draws on teachings from the Dalai Lama, Padmasambhava, and Suzuki Roshi to demonstrate that these perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory. He explores four expressions of karma: present karma experienced immediately through mental states, past impressions surfacing in meditation, how practice unfolds as karmic result, and future consequences of actions. The teaching includes important cautions against common misunderstandings—particularly the tendency toward judgment, resignation, or victim-blaming. Goldstein emphasizes contemplating karma going forward as inspiration for mindful action rather than looking backward with judgment, concluding with a Tibetan prayer wishing happiness and freedom from suffering for all beings.*

Welcome back to all of you who are online. It's wonderful to think of such an enlarged Sangha joining us here.

Tonight I'd like to continue the discussion of how we can apply the depths of the Buddha's teaching in our daily lives, because that really is the challenge. We come here in practice and we have certain levels of insight and understanding, and the challenge is how can we really bring that forward into the busyness of our lives.

The possibility of happiness, both individually and collectively, rests on one basic understanding: that the unfolding of our lives begins in the mind. The Buddha expressed this very clearly in the opening verses of the Dhammapada, which most of you probably know is a famous collection of verses of teachings of the Buddha.

The very opening stanzas are: "Mind is the forerunner of all action. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with an unwholesome mind, suffering follows as the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart. If one speaks or acts with a wholesome mind, happiness flows as surely as one's shadow."

In some way the Buddha just laid it out very clearly in terms of how to create happiness in our lives. So we need to explore and investigate the nature and the workings of this mind. How is it all unfolding? How do the actions or the qualities of our mind manifest in the world?

I want to give a very brief theoretical framework from the Buddhist perspective of what constitutes what we call mind. The most fundamental aspect of what we call mind is consciousness—the simple knowing faculty. Knowing a sight, knowing a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a mind object. It's that which knows. This consciousness is arising and passing in each moment with its own object: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, and so forth.

But consciousness doesn't arise alone. It arises together with what are called mental factors. There's a whole range of mental factors that arise in different combinations in every moment of consciousness. These mental factors color the consciousness; they inform each moment of consciousness in different ways. And it's these mental factors which continually condition and recondition all the patterns of our lives.

As examples of different mental factors that we're very familiar with: love, fear, joy, anger, grief, wisdom, ignorance, mindfulness, concentration, compassion—they are all mental factors. When they arise, they color or give a flavor or a taste to that moment of consciousness.

Being here on retreat, and also with wise attention in our lives, brings us a very immediate and direct experience of which factors lead to more suffering and which factors make us happy. This is not complicated. We're probably already quite familiar with this. How does it feel when we're angry? How does it feel when we're generous? When we're loving? It doesn't take deep samadhi to really recognize the effect these mental factors are having in our day-to-day experience.

One of the ways the Buddha expressed this wisdom of seeing what causes happiness and what causes suffering is as the law of karma. So tonight I want to explore in some depth the understanding of this most basic teaching.

Before I go on, I want to clarify the term a little bit. Technically, there's a double phrase: karma vipaka, which means action and result. Literally, karma refers to the action. But in popular parlance, we combine those two in "karma," including in our ordinary understanding both the action and the result. It's just worth knowing that there are actually two different aspects: karma vipaka.

The basic understanding of the law of karma is that all volitional activities—volitional activities of body, of speech, of mind—have the power to

bring about results. So that power to bring about results resides in this mental factor of volition. This is the karmic force in our lives.

It's helpful to look a little more carefully at this factor of volition because it plays such a critical role in how our lives unfold. Notice when you're about to do or say something, to perform some action—there is that momentary impulse. It's like a gathering of the energy, the willing of something happening. That's what the volition is. We might think of it as the command moment in the mind.

This is different than just a thought arising of what we might do. It's not just a thought; it's that particular factor which gathers all the energy. As it's described in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, volition gathers all the energy of all the other factors that are present and directs it to the accomplishment of what we want to do.

Sometimes, in terms of the practice and encouraging people to notice these moments of volition or intention, I call it the "about-to" moment. You're walking and you come to the door, about to reach. There's that moment before the reaching happens, but it's impelling—it results in the action. That's the moment of volition.

One of the interesting things about volition, which you can also check out for yourself, is that these volitions—or another synonym for that is intentions—keep arising throughout the action. For example, if you're walking, there's the initial volition to walk, and that's what gets us started. But this volition has to keep flowing throughout the whole movement, because if the volition stops, the movement is going to stop.

It's something like an electric current. Maybe you're putting a light on—if you stop the current, the light goes out. So if the volition stops in the midst of an action, the action is going to stop. This is something we generally don't notice at all. It's just kind of fun to check it out for yourself because it's not hard to see as you're walking.

So although these volitions are very quick, arising just in the moment, and they're very small, hardly noticeable, they contain a huge power. That's why the Buddha gave so much emphasis to understanding volition. The power they have, contained right within that volition, is the power to bring about future results. You could think of it almost like the power in a seed. A seed can be very small, and yet it has the power to produce a tree. That's the power that volition has—it will bring about future results.

This is why volition is the linchpin of understanding the law of karma. We really have to deeply understand this if we want to understand the unfolding of our lives. Our lives are unfolding in a lawful way, and one of the laws is the law of karma. So if we want to understand how our lives are unfolding, we have to appreciate the power that resides in these volitions, in these intentions. Volitional actions bear fruit. We cannot fully understand the Buddha's teachings without understanding to some extent this basic law of cause and effect—that intention, volition, brings results.

What's interesting is that probably most of us on some level can appreciate that our actions will bear some kind of fruit. On just a basic theoretical level, we may understand that. But what I find really interesting, and I see this in myself and I imagine it's true of everybody else, is how often do we consider that truth before we take an action? Do we register that the volition behind this action is going to bear some future result? That's an important piece of information for us to have.

Volition brings about a result not only in the moment—and this is what makes the law of karma so vast and so difficult to understand as well—it has the power to bring about results in the immediate future and in the long-distant future. This gets to be quite mysterious. How does an intention in this moment bring a result five lifetimes from now?

This is why the Buddha said when he was teaching about karma, don't think too much about it because it will drive you crazy. He said really only the mind of a Buddha can understand it in its full complexity. So in talking about it tonight, I'm not going to suggest that we're going to come away understanding the answer to that question of how something we do now will result in something in the distant future. But it will provide a framework, really a framework of guidance in our lives, to emphasize how it's possible that a small moment can have such huge power.

I came across this statement by Albert Einstein. He said, in talking about his equation $E=mc^2$, that the energy contained in a raisin is enough to power all the energy needs of New York City for a day. So you know those raisins you've been having at tea? Do you ever think of that? Well, likewise, we rarely think of the fact that our volitional actions have an analogous kind of power. But it's hidden. It's not obvious.

Now, these intentions, these volitions, are ethically neutral. The intention, that particular mental factor, is not wholesome and it's not unwholesome. It's just, one might say, the vehicle or the mechanism for karmic unfolding. It contains the power to bring about results, but it is the motivations associated with the intention that determine what the result will be.

So this is important. The volition is kind of the energy impulse, but then what determines the particular results that come have to do with the motivations behind the intention, behind the volition. The Buddha pointed out which motivations lead to suffering and which motivations lead to happiness, to peace, to freedom.

He clarified this in many ways, but the simplest description of understanding how motivations influence outcome is his description of the root of all unwholesome actions as being greed, hatred, and delusion. We could trace any unwholesome action that we do back to one of those three roots. So those are things we can keep an eye out for if we're trying to see what our motivations are in a particular action. Is there greed here? Is there aversion or anger? Is there delusion?

And likewise, the three wholesome roots, obviously, are non-greed, which is generosity; non-hatred, which is loving-kindness; and non-delusion, which is wisdom. I appreciate this because it simplifies our task of trying to understand the motivations behind our actions. Sometimes they can be very subtle, but basically they come down to these three unwholesome roots and three wholesome roots.

What we find, though, is that our motivations can be very subtle and they are often overlooked. We have an intention to do something and we just do it. I would say probably most of the time we don't stop to pay attention to that moment, to that about-to moment, and consider what the motivation is. This is a challenging part of the practice, but it has such consequence in our lives that it would be worth beginning to explore the possibility of paying attention to that.

Just as a few examples of how sometimes it's very difficult to really assess the motivation: maybe there's an impulse, an intention to give. There could be a lot of different motivations behind that. Even though the act of generosity itself is a wholesome act, and there's always a wholesome aspect to it, it could be mixed at times with some unwholesome aspects. Is it mixed with expectation of getting something back? Are we giving out of guilt in some situation? Is the motivation metta or compassion?

I'll give you an example where I completely missed a kind of subtle motivation in an act of generosity. This goes back to my India days. I was in Bodh Gaya, which is really just a small village, but it's where the Buddha was enlightened, so it's a very powerful

place. In between retreats, I was just in the local bazaar buying some fruits and vegetables. And as those of you who have been in India know, there are often a lot of beggars around, especially little kids. So I'm buying these oranges, and this little beggar boy comes up with his hand out. Just without thinking, I take one of the oranges I just bought and give it to him. This was not some great act of generosity—it was just a small thing.

And then something really interesting happened. He just walked away without the slightest acknowledgment. I was not expecting effusive thanks. And I didn't realize I was expecting anything. But when I gave him the orange and he just walked away, it revealed—oh yes, there was a little bit of an expectation of even the slightest acknowledgment, a smile. So that's how subtle it can be, that often there are these motivations mixed in that we don't even recognize, we don't see, unless we're really paying attention.

So discovering what our motivations truly are is really the gift of mindfulness to this understanding. It's only if we're really being mindful in the moment that we even have a chance of seeing and understanding. Mindfulness plays such a key role not only here on retreat, but in our lives.

The writer John Barth, in talking about understanding our own motivations, has this one line which I think will resonate: "Self-knowledge is always bad news." When we really start looking at our minds, it's always bad news. But when we examine our motivations carefully, when we're really watching and trying to see some of the subtleties, we'll see that we're probably less good and also less bad than we think we are. We all are just this mix.

And this mix was expressed in a line by the poet W.H. Auden. Again, this is another one of my favorite lines: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart." It's just acknowledging that yes, we all have crooked hearts, and our neighbors have crooked hearts, and we can love. It's appreciating the complexity of our own condition. It's not all one way or all another way—we're a mix. And that's why we need to pay attention. Because in the mix, if we want to create the conditions for happiness, we have to sort out what are the wholesome states and what are the unwholesome states.

This is a powerful investigation, which can be done as well in the world as on retreat. It provides a framework for really connecting with the depth of practice in the midst of our lives. And probably becoming aware of our motivations may be more obvious in the busyness of our lives, our relationships, our work. I would just encourage you to take interest in that because it is so important.

So volition is the force in the mind that initiates the action and contains the power to bring a result. Motivation is the factor or factors which determine what the fruit of that volition will be. See the difference?

One of the challenges in our practice—and in our lives—is integrating this understanding of karma with our growing insight into emptiness, selflessness, the selfless, insubstantial nature of phenomena. Some very common questions arise: If there's no self, who experiences karmic results? I must have heard that question a thousand times. Or: If everything is empty, what does it matter what I do? These are some of the questions that come up when we try to integrate the understanding of the law of karma—that actions produce results—with the profound insight into the empty, selfless nature of everything.

What we come to understand is that although phenomena are insubstantial and empty of self, everything arising and passing, still they are unfolding lawfully. It's not that things are happening chaotically. And the law of karma is one of the laws—not the only one—that governs the unfolding of this empty process.

A few teachers have, in really clever ways, expressed the unity of these two understandings: the understanding of emptiness and the understanding of karma and the law of cause and effect. The Dalai Lama said, "A Buddha perceives the ultimate truth, emptiness, while leaving conventional truth untouched"—which means the conventional truth is working even as we understand the empty nature of it all.

And then Padmasambhava, the great Indian adept who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet and is revered there almost as the second Buddha, said, "His view of emptiness is as vast as the sky, but his attention to the law of karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour." The one does not exclude or conflict with the other. Our view or understanding of emptiness can be as vast as the sky, and yet within that, we are paying careful attention to the motivations behind our actions. One phrase that has come up is that everything rests on the tip of motivation in terms of our karmic unfolding.

And there was a Korean Zen master who founded the Providence Zen Center and many branch monasteries, Seung Sahn Sunim. He expressed it this way: "There's no right and no wrong"—the level of emptiness. "But right is right and wrong is wrong"—the law of karma. There is no right, there is no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong.

Can we hold both? Can we really live from both of those perspectives?

The last one I'll mention is from Suzuki Roshi, who founded the San Francisco Zen Center. He said, "Everything is perfect, and there's always room for improvement." On the surface it seems paradoxical, but in living, it's not paradoxical at all. We can hold both levels.

Just as an example, consider a cup. The cup holds water. We can describe its shape and its aesthetics and what it's made of. But if we looked at this cup under an electron microscope—and I've never looked through an electron microscope, so I don't really know what you see—but what I'm imagining is that there's no cup. The cup has completely disappeared. It's a whole different level or order of reality. But it's not that what we see under an electron microscope is here and the cup is over there. It's a unity, and it's just seeing things on different levels. On one level, it's a cup and we take care of it and we wash it—all the ways we relate to a cup. And at the same time, we can at least appreciate the understanding that on the subatomic level, there's no cup.

This could help us learn how to live on the relative level of karma and everything else, our ordinary conventional reality—to live on the conventional level with less attachment. Because we also understand that on another level, there's no cup. It's all empty. It's all insubstantial. Can we hold both? This is really the challenge of our lives.

It's important to understand, in a little more detail, the specific ways that karmic unfolding happens in our lives—how we can actually experience it so it's not just a Buddhist philosophical teaching.

The first aspect is something people probably are not that familiar with, called present karma. We can notice the immediate effects of an action in the present moment, the immediate effects of different mind states. If there's fear, or love, or anger, or joy—the whole range of different emotions and mind states—we can feel the karmic effect of those mind states right in the present moment. What does anger feel like? What does generosity feel like? We can see immediately whether they're the cause of happiness or the cause of suffering for us. That's immediate present karma.

We can also understand present karma by noticing how people react to us as we're experiencing different mind states. When you're with somebody who's very angry, or you yourself are very angry, notice how people respond. It's probably not, unless one is quite advanced, with great open-heartedness. If we have a lot of angry energy coming through or we're projecting that, generally people put up some kind of energetic defense because it's a powerful energy. That's a present karmic result. And if we're loving, if we're generous, how do people relate to us when we're in that state? Generally with a lot of goodwill and deep friendship. This is not mysterious—we've all experienced it—but this is one of the workings of karma, and we can see it right in the present moment.

There's another aspect of present karma which could be very helpful in our lives if we really embody it: the degree to which present qualities of mind affect the outcome of what we want to accomplish. We want to undertake some project. Accomplishing something is usually related to certain factors like energy and perseverance and wisdom that we bring to the action, and that will affect the outcome. If we bring lethargy and disinterest and more unwholesome states, it's less likely that action is going to be successful. Again, immediate present karma, not hard to see. But we often don't pay attention to it and don't give proper import to that understanding.

The next expression of karma is really interesting and becomes manifest a lot on retreat. In some way it's one of the most vivid experiences we can have. That is seeing how our past—how the mind retains the impressions of all our past actions. Have you had the experience of sitting, and all of a sudden memories come that you didn't even know you remembered? What I find so amazing about the mind, and over all these years I've come to appreciate this more and more, is that I just have the feeling that

the mind contains impressions of everything we have ever done. That it's all in there. And at different times, these memories, these impressions are going to surface.

It becomes very clear—and you probably have experienced this—if a memory is coming up from some unwholesome action that we've done in the past, it very often brings a sense of remorse or maybe shame or regret. And if a memory comes up of some wholesome things we've done, it really can bring a sense of joy and delight and appreciation of ourselves in a good way.

So we see that the arising of these past impressions is also a karmic result. Unwholesome actions in the past result in this present moment in some kind of suffering. And the wholesome ones bring about some kind of happiness.

I have so many examples of this. I'll just mention one. Over the years of retreat, some of the memories that came up were of really unskillful things I did as a kid, as a boy. I remember—I wasn't really this kind of person—but I grew up in a very small town with a very small group of friends. It's embarrassing to say this. One day it just got into my mind to round up some of my friends, and we kind of hid behind a mound of dirt. Then this other friend came out, and we just started throwing rocks at him. When I look back, I can't imagine what was going on in my mind at the time, but clearly something was happening. Anyway, his mother ended up chasing me all the way through town.

Years later, maybe about ten years ago, I went to my fiftieth high school reunion. And I met this kid who I'd grown up with—we were in the same class. I said, "Do you remember this?" And he said, "Yes." And I just apologized. It felt so good. It felt so good to

acknowledge it, to apologize for it. When there's that opportunity to do that, I think it's a really wholesome thing to do. Sometimes circumstances don't allow it, but we can kind of apologize in our minds, in our hearts.

As I said, there are countless examples of this, but this was just a very vivid memory that would come back periodically—not often, but more than once that memory would surface.

What's interesting is that when we bring awareness and compassion to these surfacing impressions that come from so many of our past actions, it's actually a purifying process. When we first see it—remembering an unwholesome action—for me anyway, sometimes it's just a feeling of being aghast. How could I have done that? And then feeling bad about it. But by seeing it repeatedly, by being connected to it—unlike how my mind was when I committed the action, which was just a lot of delusion—in having it come up, in seeing it, being with it, allowing for it, accepting the fact that yes, this is what happened, it is actually purifying, and it loses its charge. We learn how to be with all of these past actions with equanimity.

You really feel this as a process of purifying the heart. Instead of holding on to our reactivity to it all, we really come to a place of peace with it.

This points to an important distinction—and I don't remember whether I talked about it to the group or not, but I think it would be worth repeating anyway—really understanding the difference between guilt and remorse.

Guilt, when we see things that we've done that were not good, not wholesome, is often a common response. One time—it was about a different situation—I was on retreat and a lot of guilt was coming up about something, and there was a lot of suffering. That suffering piqued my interest. What's going on here that's causing this suffering? And I saw that, surprisingly, guilt is an ego trip, because it's all about self being bad. "I'm so bad for having done this, this, and this"—with an emphasis on the *I*.

When I saw that this is just a trick of the ego—you know, Mara is the term in Buddhism for the embodiment of delusion. Often in the texts, the Buddha or some other monk or nun would say, "Oh, Mara, I see you." So that's what I did with the guilt.

Mara, I see you.

And then I saw that there was a wholesome side of acknowledging the unwholesome things we've done. Different people may call it different things, but I called it a wise remorse—where we really are acknowledging, yes, I did this, and it was not a whole-

some thing. We finally come to understand the unskillfulness of it. We take responsibility. We're not pretending it didn't happen. We're not pushing it down. We're really connecting with what occurred.

But that wise remorse is very different from guilt. Guilt is self-lacerating. Wise remorse is really the space of forgiveness. It's acknowledging, it's seeing, it's taking responsibility. And it can become the cause for our future restraint of those kinds of actions, precisely because we've taken responsibility for them.

So I think there is an appropriate way to be with the revelations that come up in our minds in meditation—very often revelations of the unskillful things we've done—and a way of being with them, holding them in a really skillful way. But I would watch out for the seduction of guilt, because that's just adding suffering to the whole mix. As I say, it's just a trick of Mara. It's a trick of ego.

Another working of the law of karma is simply becoming aware of all these impressions from past actions that are surfacing in the mind and seeing the effect on our minds as that happens.

The next working of karma is very relevant to all meditators: the way our practice unfolds, the way our understanding unfolds, is itself a karmic result of past actions. For some people, progress is very slow—it just takes a long time. For some people, progress is very quick. Dipa Ma, in one or two weeks, had reached high stages of enlightenment. For some people, the predominant experience in practice is pleasant. For other people, the predominant experience in practice is unpleasant. All of these are karmic results—the fruits of things we've done in the past.

The observation I've made in my own practice, and with many others, is that most of us are in this slow, painful alley. We keep going, and we work with a lot of pain in the body and difficulties in the mind. But the point is that how it unfolds is completely impersonal, in the sense that it's just the fruit of past actions. It's just conditions playing themselves out.

I want to read something. This is one of my favorite stories, highlighting the slow, painful path. It's from the Therigatha, which are the songs of the nuns:

*It is twenty-five years since I went forth. Not even for the duration of a snap of the fingers have I obtained stilling of mind. Not having obtained peace of mind, drenched with desires for sense pleasures, holding out my arms, crying out, I entered the vihara, the monastery.*

This is her reflection after twenty-five years of practice. But then she entered the monastery, and this is what she said:

*Having heard the teachings over all these years, I sat down on one side. And in that moment of sitting down, applying and reflecting on the teachings—now I know that I have lived before. The divine eye has been purified. Supernormal power has been realized by me. I have attained annihilation of the defilements. The Buddhist teaching has been done.*

Twenty-five years of struggling, and then everything came together. Conditions were right, and her mind opened to enlightenment.

This is to say that we should hold however our practice is unfolding in the understanding that there are causes and conditions behind the way it's unfolding—and it doesn't matter. To reinforce the notion that it really doesn't matter, that our practice will unfold in one of those four ways—fast or slow, pleasant or unpleasant—this is from Bhikkhu Bodhi. He said:

*Liberation is the inevitable fruit of the path and is bound to blossom forth where there is steady and persistent practice. The only requisites for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. If these requirements are met, there is no doubt the goal will be attained.*

I find that very reassuring.

Because it's basically saying our practice will unfold in many different ways depending on our past karma, but it doesn't matter. If we just start and continue, reaching the final goal is inevitable. I think we can really take inspiration from that.

This is summed up beautifully in something my teacher Munindraji said, characterizing the practice: "Time is not a factor." Can we let go of our temporal preoccupations? Just as a culture, we're so time-bound and time-oriented, always measuring things. But in dharma practice, time is not a factor. We just do our practice, we keep on walking, and the practice will bear fruit.

Now I want to turn to one of the expressions of karma which we're probably most familiar with, but one that we probably most misunderstand or are confused about or bring some mistaken impressions to.

In one of the discourses, a young householder comes to the Buddha and inquires why there are so many differences among people—differences in appearance, differences in circumstances, all kinds of differences. The Buddha explained the karmic consequences of different actions. He talked about how generosity, really cultivating gener-

osity, is the karmic cause of abundance. Stinginess, miserliness, or hoarding is the karmic cause of lack of abundance. Kind speech, gentle speech, is the cause of beauty. Harsh speech, angry speech is the cause of lack of beauty. Non-killing, non-harming is the cause of long life; killing living beings is the cause of a short life. Inquiry and investigation are the cause for wisdom to arise; lack of inquiry, lack of questioning, disinterest is the cause of delusion and ignorance.

The Buddha goes on even further—it's a longer list than I've mentioned—but I wanted to give you an idea of this teaching. However, as we begin to explore this and look into it, really great care is needed because it's very easy to fall into some common misunderstandings. People have brought up these things very often when they hear about karma. So there are a few points I really want to highlight.

First, not everything that happens to us in our lives is a karmic result. There are many laws governing the unfolding of our lives. There are simply laws of nature which determine how things happen that have nothing to do with karma—just the physical laws of nature playing themselves out. But people sometimes think everything that happens to them is a result of their past karma, and the Buddha was very explicit about saying that is not true, that's not accurate. There are many different contributing laws and factors at work.

The second thing that's really important to understand is that karma works out over innumerable lifetimes. It's impossible to understand it in the context of a single life. We can understand aspects, like present karma and these impressions of past experience coming up, but in terms of actions bringing future results, we need a very expansive vision—which the Buddha had.

It's interesting: on the night of his enlightenment, three aspects were revealed to him. He said in the first watch, he saw his innumerable past lives. In the second watch, he saw the innumerable past lives of others, being born and dying according to their karma. And then in the third watch, he understood the law of dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths. I find it fascinating that such a key part of his awakening had to do with his understanding of this law of karma extending over lifetimes.

This is important to realize. In this greater vision, we understand that we have all done everything. We've all accumulated lots of wholesome karma from wholesome actions, lots of unwholesome karma from unwholesome actions. We're all in this together. And when these actions will bring results, we don't know. We could be experiencing something from a hundred lifetimes ago arising now. There's no way for us to understand—that's what the Buddha meant when he said this is too complex for anybody but a Buddha mind to comprehend.

But reflecting on this is really important in a way I'm going to describe in a moment. We realize that we've all done things that have caused harm to others and ourselves, and we've all been benefactors to other beings. All of us have this mix within us.

Even the Buddha, although after his enlightenment he was no longer creating new karma, in his life he was experiencing the results of past karma. Just as an interesting anecdote: you may know from the Buddha's life that he left home and the palace at twenty-nine, and it took six years of ascetic disciplines and torturing the body before he became enlightened.

In the texts, it describes how the fact that it took so long and involved so many painful experiences was the result of his past karma—something he had done way in the past, and that was the karmic result of how his practice unfolded. There are stories of other Buddhas in the past who became enlightened the very day they went forth. So it's just to say that even for the Buddha, this is how karma unfolds.

We can really see the commonality of this karmic predicament. We're all in this together, as we see the unfolding of our lives—sometimes reaping the fruit of good karma, sometimes reaping the fruit of unwholesome karma.

But here's where the problem comes with understanding this particular teaching of specific actions leading to specific kinds of results. Sometimes we confuse the understanding of this very impersonal process with attitudes of judgment, of resignation, of indifference. If we are experiencing certain difficulties in our lives and just kind of think, "Oh yeah, I must have done some really bad things," we can get caught up in a lot of self-judgment. Or maybe it's just resignation or indifference. Or—and this is perhaps even more unfortunate—as we are viewing the experiences of others, maybe seeing them going through some difficulty, there can be this unfortunate tendency to blame the victim: "Oh well, that was just your karma."

This completely misses the essence of this teaching and how it should be held. We can understand that situations have causes and conditions behind them, one of them being the law of karma—it's not the only one, but it's one of the causes behind our unfolding. We can appreciate that the particular experiences we're having are the result of past causes and conditions, and still respond to present suffering with love, with compassion, with engagement. This attitude of thinking about karma as "it's just their fault" or "it's just my fault" is a completely untrue way of holding this very essential teaching.

For this reason, I find that generally it's much more helpful to contemplate the law of karma going forward rather than trying to understand it looking backwards. Looking backwards, we just don't know. If we did something a hundred lifetimes ago and it's resulting in something now, that doesn't have much meaning for us. But when we understand—and deeply understand—how the law of karma is working in our lives and are looking forward, that can be a tremendous inspiration to pay attention. To pay attention to our motivations, knowing that the actions we do now, at one point or another, will bring results. They're going to have some effect, some result.

The question we should really ask ourselves, as we're about to perform different actions, is: Is the result of this action, based on the motivation, someplace I want to go? If we're about to do something that's very greedy, seduced by desire, and we're mindful enough to reflect before the action—"Oh yes, greed. This is going to lead to an unpleasant, unwholesome result at some point. Maybe immediate, maybe next life, maybe a hundred lifetimes. But it's going to bring about an unwholesome result"—then we can hold the question: Do I want to go there?

We want to consider that before we do the action, because after the action, the karmic seed has been planted. That's why it's really important and subtle. This requires a lot of attention in our lives—to be watching our minds with interest, just noticing what mental factors are at work in the motivation behind what we want to do.

There's a Tibetan prayer of metta and compassion which I think beautifully expresses a way of holding this understanding in a really wholesome way. The prayer goes: "May you have happiness and the causes of happiness. May you be free of suffering and the causes of suffering."

I like that because it acknowledges that there are causes behind the happiness and the suffering, and our wish—for ourselves and everyone else—is: May you have happiness and the causes of happiness. May you be free of suffering and free of the causes of suffering.

To me that's very embracing. It's a very embracing quality of the heart, acknowledging this karmic situation, the law of karma in all of our lives playing itself out in so many different ways. We can hold it with this beautiful wish for ourselves and for others. And hopefully it can inspire us to really pay attention, because our actions have consequences. We need to deeply understand that, and it will have such a beneficial effect on our lives.

Just some closing thoughts. The reason I wanted to give this talk—and I don't give this talk often, because it's kind of sobering. In general, I like to give inspiring, uplifting talks where people leave feeling happy. And this one is sobering, because it's really addressing some fundamental aspects of understanding how our lives unfold.

And often I see it in myself, and other teachers are sometimes reluctant to talk about those teachings which are a little harder to take in. But the older I get, I feel like that's really a disservice. The Buddhist teachings are so broad and so meaningful and so deep in so many ways that I think it's important to put out as much of his understanding that affects us as possible.

And for me, this understanding and teaching about the law of karma is so powerful because it gives us agency in our lives. Instead of just playing out the patterns of our conditioning, if we understand how it's all working, it really empowers us to make the choices in our lives that will bring about happiness. So it feels like a really essential, important piece of understanding. It's truly a great empowerment of our beings.

I'll close with just these couple of lines from the haiku poet Bashō, who was a wonderful poet:

*The temple bell stops,*
*but the music keeps coming*
*out of the flowers.*

I love that. The temple bell—our actions are over—but the results keep coming out of the flowers, out of everything in our lives. To realize that and to appreciate it brings a lot of confidence and a lot of joy in our lives, because we do feel empowered.

Thank you for listening to this sobering talk.

CHAPTER 73

# Q&R

Joseph Goldstein · 1h03

> *In this engaging question and response session, Joseph Goldstein addresses practical challenges that arise both on retreat and in daily life. He begins with advice for transitioning from intensive retreat to social gatherings, offering the powerful reframe of bringing daily life into practice rather than the reverse, and emphasizing the undervalued practice of mindfulness of seeing as a way to reduce reactive judgments.*
>
> *Goldstein explores the crucial distinction between expectation and aspiration in spiritual practice, clarifying how the Pāli term chanda (desire to do) differs from greed. He offers an illuminating explanation of awareness of awareness, describing the 'cognizing power of emptiness' and inviting practitioners to explore the knowing quality that underlies all experience. The discussion includes his perspective on jhāna practice—not required for awakening, but a valuable tool for deepening insight.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is his guidance on navigating relative and ultimate reality, using the simple example of a cup to illustrate how different levels of experience coexist. He concludes with wisdom on working with anger and suffering in challenging times, offering the empowering view that we have 100% responsibility for our suffering—not for what happens, but for how our minds relate to it. His practical suggestion to 'change channels' from unwholesome to wholesome mind states provides an accessible tool for transformation.*

So, Joseph asked me to look through the questions and read them out. I already know we're not going to get to everybody's questions. Thank you so much for your questions, and we'll get through as much as we can. May it be of benefit to all beings.

Okay, ready?

"I'm flying directly from a month of retreat to a four-day social event—Four Seasons in Costa Rica. There will be lots of indulgent food. My āsana will be both uccha and mahā. How should I practice, especially regarding sense pleasures, craving, and renunciation?"

Good luck.

Well, in one way, you could kind of see it as the final exam for the retreat. Because hopefully all the work that you're doing here, that we do in practice, enables us to live more skillfully in our lives. Rather than seeing going to a big social scene—or just regular daily life, which is challenging enough—as leaving the retreat behind, really see that as much your practice as what you're doing here.

I was recently teaching a retreat with a few teachers, one of whom was Will Kabat-Zinn, and he was giving the closing talk at the end of the retreat about bringing the practice back into the world. He reframed it in a really interesting way, which I think could serve you. Usually we talk about how do we bring the practice into our daily life. He reframed it: how do you bring your daily life into your practice?

I thought that was a beautiful, different way of understanding. Because if we really reflect on that—how do we bring all the experiences of our lives into our practice—and we really cultivate that understanding, it's like we're making the baseline of our lives our practice, and then we bring all different aspects of our lives into it. Rather than think about daily life being the baseline and practice as something we do on the side, trying to bring the practice into our lives.

So I think entering into that kind of social whirlwind, which will definitely be challenging—if you could remember, even occasionally, "Okay, how do I bring all of that, whatever is going on, how do I bring it into my practice?" That will be a good reminder for you of settling back, of opening up, of being as mindful as you can.

One undervalued aspect of the practice—and I don't know why this is so, but it was really not emphasized much in all our time in Asia; it was mentioned but not emphasized—and yet I feel it's a really important aspect, especially when we're out in the world: mindfulness of seeing.

For people who have working eyes, the visual field is the predominant sense field of our lives. We are moving through our life, through the world, of what's being seen, predominantly. Of course, the other senses come into play, but it's mostly seeing that is so predominant. And yet there's not much emphasis on retreat. Perhaps on this retreat there has been, but I know in the retreats that I've been teaching with the team, it's not emphasized that much.

I found that by really consciously practicing, at times, mindfulness of seeing, it's quite amazing the change in perspective that brings from the world that's being seen. Instead of just being lost in all the concepts and interpretations and projections and likes and dislikes and everything that happens in the world of what's being seen, we be-

come mindful that we're seeing—in the same way that we're mindful of hearing or sensing things in the body. It's the same process. And it allows the mind to settle back into a kind of open spaciousness, an open non-reactive spaciousness.

I'll just give one example of an immediate effect that can come from mindfulness of seeing. This goes back years. I was doing a retreat at the retreat center, sitting myself. And I noticed that every time I went into the dining room, my mind had a judgment about almost everybody. I had a comment about how people were walking, what they were wearing, how much food they took. It was ridiculous. I was watching my mind do that, and it was just ridiculous. But that pattern was deeply conditioned for some reason—just all these judgments.

I began investigating: why are these judgments happening? They were all happening because I was not mindful of that moment of visual contact. The contact of seeing, seeing consciousness—when we're not mindful of it, then the mind can spin out in all kinds of reactions to what is being seen. And so I started going to the dining room, and from the moment I entered, all I did was note "seeing." Seeing, seeing—as I saw the people, seeing, saw the food on the table, seeing, seeing.

It was amazing. Something as simple as that, and perhaps ninety-five percent of those judgments were gone. So it's powerful, because we get engaged in what's being seen so automatically and reactively.

When you're in the midst of a big social gathering and all the food is there, I would suggest dropping in some periods of time where you practice doing this. It will connect you to the mind space that is available to us all the time—one that can more easily navigate the whirlwind while staying balanced in it, rather than being reactive in one way or another. So it's bringing your daily life into your practice rather than the other way around. And if you're interested, even while you're here, you might take some time out in nature, in the midst of all its beauty, just noting "seeing, seeing." We become aware of that process. I found it tremendously illuminating.

Another question: "What have you found helpful for working with spiritual craving—wanting pleasant meditative states, wanting to become wise, wanting to be done with the path?"

There's often a lot of confusion that results in questions like this because of language. The word "desire" in English has many different meanings. There's the desire of greed, which we're all familiar with. In Pali, there's a mental factor called *chanda*, which is the desire to do. It's ethically neutral—just that energy in the mind to initiate

action or to accomplish something. Whether it's wholesome or unwholesome depends on what we want to accomplish. But we could use the word "desire" in that way too, meaning something that is not necessarily greed.

A really important distinction, and I think this could get to the heart of some of those specifics, is to really investigate for yourself in your own experience the difference between expectation and aspiration. Both of these could fall under the rubric of desire. The desire of expectation—we want something to be happening. But in my experience, expectation in a spiritual endeavor is always a setup for suffering, because things unfold, as you all well know, not necessarily according to how we want them to unfold. The Dharma has a mind of its own and it will unfold the way it does.

But that doesn't mean we can't have an aspiration. Through our practice, without expectation at any particular time, we can hold an aspiration for greater compassion or greater mindfulness or greater wisdom—all the things mentioned in the question. Those aspirations are fine, and they are not the desire of greed. When we have an aspiration, it sets the direction for us. It's like the pole star in navigation. We have the aspiration and then we align our practice with it, align what we're doing with that aspiration.

That's very different. It's a very different emotional feeling, a very different energetic experience than the wanting of expectation. Even when I say the word, I can feel a certain clenching. When I say "expectation," there's a tightening, a trying to get something. Do you see the difference between that and still holding an aspiration for the things that we value? There's no contradiction there. It's seeing the difference between the two. And as I say, often there's confusion because many English words have multiple meanings. If we're not clear about the particular meaning—for example, of the word "desire"—then it can get confusing, because in English it can mean so many different things.

Here's a short question, so you might miss it if you don't listen carefully: "Aware of awareness. Please explain."

This comes up a lot because, as probably many of you know, in different Buddhist traditions—and even different Vipassana lineages—some schools really emphasize awareness of awareness, while in other traditions it's not emphasized as much, especially earlier in practice. Although in all traditions, it comes in eventually.

I think it's helpful to have a certain framework for understanding the momentary process. This is in the discourses themselves, but it's elaborated even more in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology. One of the early insights of Vipassana practice—in the various stages of insight that one can go through—is experiencing and realizing and

understanding that in every moment, two things are happening. There's the knowing and the object of the knowing. There's the knowing of a sound, the knowing of a sight, the knowing of a smell, taste, touch. Our experience is really unfolding in this pairwise progression: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

So let's do a little experiment.

If you move your arm—I invite you to do that, just move your arm—do you know that it's moving? I hope so. This is just ordinary experience, moving our arm. We feel it. We know. We know the sensations of the movement. But it's not the arm that knows. If you moved the arm of a dead body, as far as we can tell, there wouldn't be any knowing going on.

So in this very simple example—and you could think of it in terms of walking or any of the sense doors—there's the physical matter of the body, which in Buddhism is described as the four elements manifesting in different ways, and there's the knowing, the consciousness of that experience.

I think it's helpful to explore a little bit, to understand on some level, that in every moment this is what's going on: knowing an object arising together, passing away together, arising, passing away. Now the object is usually more predominant, more tangible. The knowing aspect is much more subtle because it's immaterial. So for most of the practice, or a good part of it, the emphasis is given to being mindful of the object, because it's easier to be mindful of. It's a more tangible experience. But both are happening.

Even when we're mindful of the breath, or a sensation of walking, the physical sensations may be predominant, in the foreground, but the knowing is always there—the knowing of the object arising and passing in each moment. You can think of it as foreground-background. Depending on what we choose to pay attention to, or what unfolds naturally in the course of practice, the foreground and background can switch back and forth. Sometimes it's the object that's really predominant, but one could choose to turn the attention more to the knowing of it.

Now it starts to get interesting, because when we're looking at the knowing, at the awareness, there's nothing to find. It's immaterial, not a tangible experience. Another exercise I've done in my sitting sometimes, as a way of exploring all this: I might be sitting, and if there happen to be some sounds arising, I'll ask myself the question, "Can I find what's knowing the sound?" I know that I'm knowing it because I'm hearing—I'm

hearing the sound, so clearly there's awareness of the sound. But then I turn my attention, asking that question: Can I find what's knowing the sound? And there's nothing to find, yet the knowing is happening.

This gets into the mystery of how we experience consciousness. It's understanding that yes, the knowing is there, but there's nothing tangible to find that is knowing. This is important because sometimes you may hear the instruction, "Become aware of awareness." Unless one understands this, people often struggle, trying to find it. How do I become aware of awareness? Where is it? How can I put my finger on it? But when we realize that there's nothing to find and yet the knowing is happening, then we relax back into—I don't know, you could call it the mystery of knowing, the mystery of consciousness. And you're very aware of its knowing, the capacity of the mind to know.

There's one Tibetan expression I like a lot. I didn't really come across this in the classical Theravada teachings, but it resonated deeply with my experience. The phrase was, in talking about awareness, "the cognizing power of emptiness." I love it because it combines that understanding that there's nothing to find, and yet there's this cognizing power of the mind, the power of the mind to know. For me it was a nice frame for that experience: the cognizing power of emptiness.

Now I'm going to suggest something that definitely is not in the texts, but I was just playing with it on my own retreats and having a lot of fun with it. Don't report me.

I was on a self-retreat, sitting and walking, and I did this particularly in walking practice. I did a sequence of things. First I was walking back and forth, and then I simply framed the experience, languaged it to myself: "Okay, just walking through space." At that point I was not narrowing the focus on the body or the feet or the legs—it was just the whole body walking, but walking through space. Somehow that space became the context in which it was happening. There was really that feeling of expansiveness, the space becoming foreground and the experience of the sensations becoming background.

I did that, and it was fun because it makes the experience quite expansive—just walking through space. Then the second thing I did was framing it as walking through the mind. That was really interesting because it highlighted the knowing aspect. Just walking through the mind, and so the whole experience of the body moving—

was seen or experienced as being an appearance in the mind. Because it's the mind which is knowing it. And so that's another way of beginning to get a sense of, or being mindful of, aware of awareness—when in one way or another, we bring the awareness component of what's happening into the foreground rather than into the background.

Did that make any sense at all? I was having fun with this.

So I'll just say one more thing. I don't know if I should say this—I'll probably mess up your practice. But for me, one of the things that has kept me motivated—I've been practicing a long time now, fifty years, sixty years—what's kept the energy up for me in all these years has been just the quality of interest. Because this whole mind-body process is so interesting. And the quieter our mind gets, the more facility we have just for investigating, taking interest in exploring.

So that little exercise I just mentioned was just my way of playing, of exploring. Okay, well, what would it be like doing this or this? Now, the hesitation in my mind about saying this is that sometimes people can go overboard with this kind of investigation—oh, let's play this way, that way—and it just gets confusing and you're kind of losing your concentration. So I just say, when it's done skillfully, when it's done in a wise, appropriate way, this quality of interest or just playing—playing with our experience and how we're understanding things—I find very energizing for the practice. So that it doesn't just become mechanical: okay, I'm doing this, this, this.

And I'll say that for some people this may resonate and for other people not. For other people it's good to have a very structured way of practice. So I'm not saying one is better than the other. See what works for you. Just putting this out as another possibility.

Basically, have fun. This is an amazing process of discovery, so you kind of enjoy it—even when it's hard. Sometimes it's hard.

*Question: I have long wondered if exploration of the jhānas was required or optional in following this path to its end?*

Okay, so this is an easy question because it's definitely not required, and it's clear in the texts. There are suttas in which there are arahant monks—and it doesn't refer to the nuns, but I'm sure it's the same situation—where people have become fully enlightened without having experienced the jhānas. So it's definitely not required.

At the same time, when you read the suttas, the Buddha talks a lot about it. The jhānas are mentioned in many, many suttas. But it's also important to realize that different teachers have very different interpretations of what the jhānic experience is. Some teachers' understanding of jhāna is something that is really quite accessible to many people, and there are powerful experiences that happen. Other teachers understand jhāna as being a higher level of absorption and concentration that is not so easy, that really takes quite a lot of practice. So even in using or asking the question about jhāna, teachers have very different views on what that means—just to understand that.

Basically, the stronger our concentration, the easier the whole deepening of insight happens. So concentration is a key factor to develop in our practice. And it does develop when we're just doing vipassanā practice. Even when we're not doing a formal concentration practice, the concentration will develop. You're probably familiar with the term momentary concentration, which is the mind concentrated on changing objects. Jhāna is the concentration that comes when the mind is on a fixed object. So we're not—that's why it's not vipassanā. We're not in the process of seeing change. In jhāna practice we're trying to keep the mind steady on a single object. So it's just steadiness.

And as I'm sure you've experienced, at least at times, sometimes the mind is quite steady and sometimes it flickers. The image for concentration that's in the texts is like a candle flame in a windless place. If there's no wind, the flame will be steady.

And if there's even a little bit of wind or breeze, the flame will flicker. Well, our minds can flicker a lot. But both in vipassana, through momentary concentration, and in the one-pointed concentration of jhana, the mind does get increasingly steady. As that steadiness develops, it can lead to really deep states of absorption. So as I said, the more powerful our concentration, the more effective a tool it becomes for deepening insight.

One of my teachers used this example: if you want to cross a big lake, practice without jhana is like swimming across. You can do it, but it takes considerable effort. For people who have developed a high level of jhana, it's like taking a boat across the lake—much easier.

However, depending on one's background, conditioning, paramis—all the factors that shape how our minds are now—for some people concentration comes really easily. They just have a natural affinity for whatever reason. Other people, like myself, certainly when I started my practice, had no affinity for concentration at all. I would just sit and my mind would think all the time. And I loved it! It was interesting and the hour went quickly. But I definitely wasn't getting anywhere. So people differ. There are some natural yogis, but that was not me.

For some people, even though a boat gets you across the lake more quickly, it will take longer to build the boat than to swim across. This is to say that concentration is a very valuable development across the whole spectrum of practice. These days, some people call it "light jhana" and "deep jhana"—different interpretations of it. But at whatever level, concentration is a good thing to deepen. And it also deepens naturally in the course of vipassana practice. Momentary concentration will lead to deep states of samadhi.

So I hope this puts some frame around it. Jhana is not necessary. But for those who either have the interest or the affinity for developing it, it's a very helpful thing to do.

The next question has a beginning, but then extends further. The essential question is: What are some approaches for learning to discern the wise balance of relative and absolute in practice? For example, being with phenomena as they arise and dissolve, as opposed to being the space into which the phenomena dissolve. The questioner shares that early conditioning in childhood of Hindu devotion and spiritual leadership, attachment trauma, a husband's early death, aspirations of wanting to have a child, needing to provide financially, grief, and fire for the Dharma have pointed them to a mix of Tibetan and Theravadan practice side by side. Recognition of emptiness is available often now, as is profound suffering at the relative level. How to balance the density with the space?

I'll use one simple example of the difference between ultimate reality and relative reality, to convey what that's really referring to.

There's a cup. And this cup happens to have water in it, so I'll try to be mindful. We all know what a cup is. We use it, we take care of it, we wash it—all of that. But if we looked at this cup under a high-power microscope, there would be no cup. There would be a whole other level of reality.

Recently I've been reading and listening to some lectures about quantum reality, and one lecture was so good that at the end of it I was under the illusion that I understood it—which I don't—but it was so clear. And that quantum reality is nothing like the cup. It's a completely different order of reality.

So the question is, how do we hold both? Because it's not that the cup is here, the relative reality, and then ultimate reality is over there. It's the same experience seen at different levels.

And this is what was happening in our practice.

We could think of the relative reality—like having a body—just like the cup. We have to take care of it and relate to it in skillful ways, in helpful ways. But to the degree that through our practice we understand the more ultimate level, something shifts. In our meditation, what that means is when the concentration and mindfulness begin to develop and get stronger, we don't experience the body as something solid. We begin to experience the body really as a changing energy field, and we're experiencing this on a more and more microscopic level. The whole solidity of the body disappears. Even the notion of the body disappears.

I remember one time I'd been doing a long retreat and I was sitting, just in that place of—you might say—an energetic field of rapidly changing sensations. And I couldn't tell whether I was sitting or standing because the whole form and the whole level of concept was gone.

So in our practice, that's analogous to the more ultimate level, the microscopic level or the quantum level of reality, when we're getting beneath the conventional understanding of really discrete objects, things that are solid and more or less fixed in certain ways.

What's helpful in terms of navigating the conventional relative world—our personal interactions and the story of our lives, all of that on the relative level—what makes navigating all that even when it can be challenging at times, is the experience, if we have a deep experience, of the more ultimate level. This momentary process of change of mind-body elements, everything just changing so quickly all the time, no solidity, nothing to hold on to—to the degree that we've integrated that experience at least to some extent, the wisdom of that experience or realization, we can then apply it at the relative level. We're navigating this more ordinary level of reality but with much less attachment, because we know from our own experience that on another level none of this is even really happening. On the relative level it is, and that's why we have to deal with it skillfully.

And it's really interesting. Different Buddhist traditions highlight the dangers of getting attached to the relative level, which happens a lot in people's lives. We get attached to things being a certain way. But they also point out that people can get attached to emptiness, to the more ultimate level. And that takes the form of, "Oh, it's all empty, so nothing matters." So that's the danger on that side. We can either get too stuck on the relative level or too dismissive of the relative level.

This is—talk about balancing—the toggle between the two. We have to integrate the wisdom that comes from the deeper understanding of emptiness. Emptiness of solidity, and really the heart of the practice in a way is emptiness of self. As we have more experience with that, as I say, then we can be with the circumstances on the conventional level with just a lot more spaciousness, or ease, or less attachment.

So that's one big piece in terms of the balance. I'll just give one example that came to mind. When I was practicing in India in Bodh Gaya—it's a small village, but it's the place the Buddha was enlightened, so it's a very powerful place—in the village there was a working elephant. You could see the elephant going up and carrying stuff. So one

time I was walking from the monastery where I was staying into the village, into the bazaar. I was walking in and noting: seeing, seeing. And then I saw the elephant coming. Well, I didn't just go on saying "seeing, seeing, seeing." I got out of the way.

That's the union of the relative and the absolute. We have to employ the appropriate level depending on the circumstance.

One last thing for dealing with the suffering on the relative level. This is where we suffer a lot—the relative level of concept of self, concept of I, attachments, grief, all kinds of things happening on this ordinary level of reality. There's one phrase that I've been using a lot in the teachings lately: Don't waste your suffering.

Let me back up a minute. I came across the best definition of *dukkha* that I've encountered. *Dukkha* is the first noble truth, generally translated as suffering, but it's much bigger than suffering, because the Buddha said all conditioned things are *dukkha*. But that's an aside.

The definition of dukkha that I came across was "the inevitability of unwanted experiences." I love this because it just lays it out, and it's what the Buddha pointed to—that in this conditioned realm of existence, unwanted experiences are inevitable for everybody.

So then the question becomes: what's the skillful way of relating to unwanted experiences? And here's where "don't waste your suffering" comes in.

The Buddha didn't waste suffering because he didn't rest with the first noble truth. He investigated: what's the cause of dukkha? And then the third and fourth noble truths: what's the end of suffering, and what's the path to that end?

In not wasting your suffering—for the most part now, when my mind gets into some kind of distress, some unease about whatever, when I find my mind in that kind of state, it piques my interest. It's like, "Okay, what's the mind doing that's causing the distress, that's causing the suffering?" Because usually we either have a lot of aversion to it and want to get rid of it, or we're drowning in it, getting lost in the whole turmoil. That to me is wasting the suffering, because neither one is productive.

But if we take an interest, if we really look at our minds—okay, what am I holding on to? What am I pushing away? What am I not accepting?

There's one statement that many people have a hard time with, but I find tremendously empowering. I don't know where you all are going to fall with this: we are one hundred percent responsible for our suffering. This doesn't mean that we're responsible for the different and sometimes terrible things that can happen. We're not responsible for that. But we are responsible for how our minds are relating to it.

I find this so helpful because it's reminding us that we have agency in the face of suffering, in the experience of suffering. It's not that we're just helpless in the face of that. We have agency with regard to what our minds are doing, how our minds are responding.

So this is a powerful way when we are on the relative level, with all the turmoil that can bring—we can look, we can investigate, we can take interest in our own minds to see how they're creating the suffering for us in the face of those experiences.

So there are these two aspects: the toggle between the ultimate and the more relative, and "don't waste your suffering."

I think maybe we could leave it there, if that's okay. Or we could take one more? One more is okay? Sure. You'll be a bit late for your soup. That's inevitable suffering.

Okay, this is a two-part question. I felt like it would be good to finish with: "Any advice to support working with this challenging and dark time on our beautiful planet would be welcome. And specifically, as a lifelong activist, I'm experiencing a good deal of anger arising as I witness events unfolding in the world, and maintaining equanimity has been more difficult. When can anger be useful, if ever? Can anger and equanimity coexist?"

Thanks. So this links into what I was just saying about how we have agency with regard to our mind states. And we have agency in two ways.

First, we have agency when we see the difference between being identified with what's arising and simply being mindful of what's arising. For example, we see all the terrible things that are happening in the world, the injustice—and there's so much. In seeing that, it could easily call up the response of anger about it all, or reactivity in one way or another. So the first question is: are we being mindful enough of those mind states that are arising so that we see them in a meditative way? Are we being mindful of them rather than lost in them and identified with them? This is our basic practice of mindfulness.

But then—and this is another aspect of having agency with regard to our own mind states—we have the ability to actually choose what mind states to settle into. I think of it this way: you know how, not here of course, but at home, you're sitting watching TV maybe at night, you don't like the channel, you take out the remote, you change channels. We all have an inner remote. If we see an unwholesome mind state arising and we're mindful enough to see it rather than simply being carried away by it—take out your remote. Just click. Change the channel. You could change to a compassion channel.

You could change to a metta channel. You could change to a generosity channel. You could change to the concentration channel. There are many wholesome mind states that we can shift our attention toward.

Let me give you one quick example. This goes back many years. I had gone to Burma to sit for a few months with Sayadaw U Pandita, and a good friend and colleague, Steve Armstrong, was a monk at the time in Burma and had been there for many years already. He'd been there three or four years when I arrived. So when I came, of course, he was so still and kind of radiant from all of that practice.

At first, the channel my mind was on was the comparing channel. You know—how well he's doing, and I just got here, filled with all my stuff. But pretty quickly I said, "Well, Joseph, get it together." After I saw that unhelpful mind state, I just changed channels to mudita. And I thought, "Oh yes, may your practice continue to deepen. May you become fully enlightened." It was amazing. It didn't take any effort or any length of time. As soon as I changed channels, it brought a lot of joy to see this good friend in that wonderful state.

This is such a good example. We don't have to stay locked into mind patterns that are not skillful. But we have to be mindful in the first place that they're arising, and then realize or remember that we can simply switch to a wholesome state.

Then there's the question about whether anger is ever helpful. Again, this might not be the ultra-orthodox Buddhist answer, but for me it has a practical application. Sometimes I see the response of anger to certain things—if we witness a lot of injustice in the world, or people doing terrible things—and our first response might be anger. I see the arising of that anger as the messenger that something is wrong here, something that needs to be addressed.

But then the question becomes: do we stay in the anger mode, which is not productive and not sustainable? Or can we take the message of it and say, "Yes, this is a situation that, if I can do something about it, would be good to engage with"? We take the message of the anger, but then can we fuel our response from a more wholesome state—like compassion, compassion for the suffering that's being caused?

Compassion is a beautiful state, and it can motivate us in a much more sustained way for continued action than anger could. So I see there is value in that first, perhaps reactive moment, highlighting that this is a situation we really need to understand and if possible do something about. But then we shift the motivation so it's not anger that's fueling us. In these situations, compassion is the obvious wholesome state. We feel compassion for the suffering that's there, and we want to alleviate it. That's how they can work together.

This was wonderful. I don't come here that often anymore, even though I'm just up the hill a little bit. But every time I come, I'm simply amazed. Even coming into the hall—you're probably very aware of it, although maybe you've gotten used to it—just walking in, it is really still. It's very interesting: even when we were building the place and just locating different buildings, before the hall was even built, almost everybody felt the stillness here. We had different feng shui consultants, and they pointed out the energetic lines in the earth. But this is a really special place in terms of that stillness and quiet. It was that way from the beginning. And I felt it just coming in this evening.

So... I could live here. It's really nice. I'm sure you are enjoying it, and I hope you continue to do so.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 74

# Why Meditate

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses the essential question that every practitioner eventually faces: why meditate? Drawing from the opening verse of the Dhammapada—'mind is the forerunner of all things'—he illuminates how our mental conditioning shapes every aspect of our experience, from our reactions to simple sensory input to our deepest patterns of behavior.*
>
> *Goldstein shares his initial encounter with his teacher Munindraji in Bodh Gaya over fifty years ago, whose simple instruction to 'sit down and observe the mind' captured the essence of meditation practice. He explores the various insights that arise through sustained practice: recognizing the wandering mind, discovering the 'undercurrent of thought' (what Dujun Rinpoche called 'the sneaky thieves of meditation'), and understanding how even subtle mental activity constantly reinforces our sense of self.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance on working with motivation, speech, and difficult emotions. Goldstein emphasizes 'don't waste your suffering' as a transformative approach to challenging experiences, and shares his personal breakthrough with fear through genuine acceptance rather than mere recognition. He addresses the profound implications of impermanence—'everything is always becoming otherwise'—and the Buddha's reflection that we are 'not exempt' from aging, illness, and death. The teaching culminates in exploring selflessness (anattā), revealing how identification with momentary experience creates the felt sense of self, and how understanding this empty nature naturally gives rise to compassion for all beings.*

It's really good to be with you all, even if it is via Zoom.

Today, I would like to address a very simple question, which at one point or another may have occurred to you. The question is: Why meditate? Why am I doing this? Is it about reducing stress, having greater ease in our lives, or is there something more?

In the opening lines of the Dhammapada, one of the collections of the Buddha's teachings in verse, the very first line says, "Mind is the forerunner of all things." This immediately gives us a clue as to why we meditate.

Here, mind means more than just thoughts or intellect. Mind in the Buddhist sense—consciousness—is the basic capacity to know, to be aware. It also includes all of the different qualities of mind, which in Buddhism are called mental factors. These arise in

every moment of consciousness, coloring that awareness in a whole variety of ways. Concentration, love, restlessness, boredom, joy, happiness, compassion—all of these are mental factors, qualities which arise at different times, and they color consciousness according to their own particular nature.

These qualities arising in the mind are the manifestation of our own particular conditioning—what we have either knowingly or unknowingly cultivated in the course of our lives. Have we cultivated love? Have we cultivated aversion? Have we cultivated fear or joy? Our mind is the manifestation of all this conditioning, which we express in the way we live.

This conditioning sometimes manifests in unusual ways, because the same experience of sights or sounds or tastes or sensations in the body can produce very different reactions in different people, depending on their particular conditioning.

I had one striking example of this. Early on, when I met my first teacher, Munindraji, in India, he loved hot chili peppers—the hotter, the better. We would be eating together, and he would be having these hot chili peppers. Once I just tasted a little bit of one, and my whole mouth was on fire, burning. I asked Munindraji, "Do you really enjoy these? The experience seems so unpleasant." He explained that in his way of understanding, hot chili peppers were very good for health. So even though the stimulus was, to me, very painful and unpleasant, he experienced it in the context of doing something really good for his body. He was enjoying them. It struck me as such a good example of how we each filter our experience through our own particular background, our own particular conditioning.

So when we say mind is the forerunner of all things, it's more than an abstract philosophical principle. What we do, how we feel, all of our aspirations, all of our regrets—they're all expressions or manifestations of the mind.

I was first introduced to intensive meditation practice when I went to India, to Bodh Gaya. This goes back a long time, fifty years or more. When I met my teacher, Munindraji, he said something that totally captured my interest. I was young at that time, just twenty-three years old. I knew very little about Buddhism. But when I first met him, he said something so simple: "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it."

The common sense of it was striking to me. There was nothing to join. There were no rituals. There were no ceremonies. If you want to understand your mind, sit down—or take any posture—and observe it. How else could we understand our minds except by doing that? This is another response to the question of why meditate: we come to an understanding of our own minds.

As we do this, even from the very beginning, there's one insight of insight meditation which becomes immediately apparent. So if there are some of you who are wondering, "Well, I've been practicing insight meditation and I'm still waiting for the insights to come"—you've all had this first insight.

And that is noticing how often the mind wanders. Has anybody not had that insight before? I think not. Because we give the mind this very simple object of meditation—it might be the breath or certain sensations in the body—and then very quickly, the mind hops on these trains of association. Pretty soon our mind is off in some completely other place. It's like we hop on the train without knowing that we've hopped on. And because we didn't buy the ticket, we don't even know where the train is going. After some time, by the end of that particular thought train, we could be in a whole different inner mental environment because of this wandering mind.

So again, in answering the question "why meditate?" one response might be: well, it's just to make sense of all of this. As we begin to look at our minds, to observe them and see everything the mind is doing, it can be confusing. There's so much going on. We meditate to come out of the confusion, to come out of all our habitual reactions, into a space of greater wisdom, of greater clarity. We begin to see much more clearly what actually is going on in our experience rather than being lost in it. We begin to see what it is that's shaping our lives.

The first step in this whole process is, through meditation, calming the mind and collecting the attention—really strengthening the steadiness of mind, the ability or capacity for the mind to stay steady on whatever we're attending to. When we do this, instead of unknowingly hopping on all these chains of associations, we become much more aware, and much more aware more quickly, of when the mind is lost in thought, when we're carried away by different feelings and emotions, and when we're actually being mindful of them.

Even just this very simple thing—being aware of when we're lost and then when we're actually being mindful—really highlights for us what mindfulness means. This is why sometimes in practice I really encourage people, when we're lost in a thought and then wake up from being lost, to pay attention to that very moment of waking up. Lost, lost, lost, and then—oh, thinking. Right there in that moment, instead of judging

ourselves ("Oh, lost again"), we can actually have delight in the fact that we're now awake. We can have a very clear sense of what wakefulness means, what awareness means, because we've just gone from being deluded to being awake.

So one piece of encouragement here is that for as many times as you get lost in thought, that many times do you awaken. Why not delight in all those moments of awakening rather than judging oneself for having been lost? For me, that moment of transition is really powerful, and it's one that we often just pass over. We don't highlight that moment and what can be learned from it.

At first, we may notice and become mindful most easily of the loudest thoughts, or the longer stories that we're engaged in, or the more dramatic emotions. Given the state of the world, these may be coming with greater and greater frequency these days. But what's interesting is that both in sitting meditation and in walking meditation and also in our daily lives, we may be missing the more frequent but quickly passing thoughts—the lighter ones.

I had a really interesting experience of this recently, a few years ago, on a self-retreat. I was just going for a walk, but with the intention and application of being mindful as I walked. It wasn't the Vipassana speed of lift, move, place—it was just walking at a more or less normal pace, but being as mindful as I could. What was so surprising to me in doing that, after many years of practice, was how many quickly passing thoughts would arise, even in the span of one step. And in those moments, even though they were quickly passing thoughts, in the moment they were going on, I was not mindful of them because they were so light. They were underneath my radar. This undercurrent of thought was really interesting to me.

I want to read a little teaching from Dudjom Rinpoche, who was one of the great Tibetan masters of the last century, because it really points to this experience and the importance of becoming aware of this undercurrent of thought. This is what he wrote:

"When you are meditating, it is easy to identify your coarse thoughts when they arise suddenly. But until a few of your subtle thoughts have arisen and are recognized, you do not know that they are there. These are called the undercurrent of thought."

And I love this next phrase: "They are the sneaky thieves of meditation." For that reason, it is very important to post the guard of mindfulness. I love this—the thieves of meditation—because we think we're meditating.

We think we're being mindful. And we are to some or even a large extent, but underneath there is this pretty frequent horizon of these light thoughts.

What's interesting is that for me, I saw so many of them in one way or another were referencing a sense of self. It could be a plan or a memory or a comment or a judgment. And so unknowingly, with these thieves of meditation, we're reinforcing this view of self, this view of I.

I really began to appreciate with interest—it truly captured my interest—to watch, not only in times of formal meditation, but throughout the day, just noticing the many times these undercurrents of thought are present. And this is one way of tremendously deepening our practice. We're dropping down to a more subtle level. We're training the quality of our attention, refining the quality of our attention.

One example of the impact of this undercurrent of thought came to my mind when I began to observe it in myself. It felt like the soundtrack of a movie or a TV show. This is probably a fairly common experience. When I'm watching a movie, sometimes I can be so absorbed in the story that I'm not even consciously aware of the soundtrack, the music in the background. And yet that soundtrack is powerfully manipulating our emotions. Music plays a certain way and we get tense, another way and we feel happy. All of this is going on in the background and we're hardly even aware of it. And yet it's having this tremendous impact on our lives.

This is why I'm emphasizing so much—and why it's been of such interest to me—to really emphasize within our practice of mindfulness keeping an eye out for these very light thoughts.

Sometimes it can be really amusing because we become aware of these random thoughts that just pop up in the mind. One time I was on retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita in Australia. As many of you know, he was a very strict and demanding teacher, and everybody was really trying to be impeccably mindful. We were in line for lunch and I was second in line. We were going through the lunch line, and the person in front of me reaches the table with the food. He takes the lid off the pot and puts it down. But as he put the lid down, it fell to the floor and made this big clattering noise in the midst of all this silence. And the first thought in my mind, just in that moment, was: "It wasn't me."

A sense of humor about one's mind is essential in this whole path of practice. As one yogi told me in an interview once, as he was observing his mind, he said, "I have discovered the mind has no pride. It will do anything." But we do not have to be caught by it all. We don't have to be identified with it. If we're aware of it, we can really have a sense of humor about everything the mind is doing.

With this attention to the nature of our mind and what's arising in our thoughts and emotions, we also begin to get very clear about the deeply conditioned habit patterns that have been developed over the course of our lives and that are driving our lives. For example, are the conditioned patterns that we see come up again and again obsessive planning? Worry? Anxiety? The judging mind, either of ourselves or others? Are our actions motivated by generosity, by love, or are they motivated by desire or by anger? Or probably some combination of them all.

This investigation and understanding is not a theoretical exercise. Through the mindfulness of all these patterns, it shows us so clearly how we're leading our lives. Instead of just acting out mechanically the patterns of our conditioning, we're really beginning to see what's going on.

In whatever we do, we might ask the question: What quality of heart and mind is being cultivated? What is becoming habituated? What is being strengthened?

And what makes this entire exploration so transformative—and this understanding is what imbues our practice with tremendous power—is the profound realization that we have agency in this whole process. It's not that we're condemned to just act out all the patterns of our conditioning. As we cultivate mindfulness and we see with greater clarity what's going on, not so lost and carried away by it, that's when we can exercise some discerning wisdom and say, "Okay, what's skillful? What should be cultivated? What's not skillful? What should I let go of?"

Through the power of mindfulness, we begin to see that our minds can be trained. This is a tremendous understanding because I think most people in the world don't realize it. We're just living our lives, we are who we are, and we act it all out without the understanding that the mind is a dynamic process that can be trained. It's mindfulness of what's going on in our minds that allows us to make wise choices.

The question then for all of us is: trained for what? We're transformed, but transformed in what way? The Buddha pointed out the various possibilities in one very simple statement when he said that our minds can be our best friend or our worst enemy. I think we've all had experiences of both. When the mind is in a wholesome state, it becomes our best friend. When the mind is in an unwholesome state, especially in an extreme case, it can become our worst enemy.

With this understanding, we see the causes of either great happiness and fulfillment in our lives or the causes of great suffering—and the realization that we have agency in that. This is a powerful recognition. As another answer to the question "Why meditate?" we can say: to make our minds our friend. I love that. What could be a more intimate friendship than friendship with our own hearts and minds?

What I so appreciate about the Buddha's teachings is the clarity with which he sorted all this out. I'm often struck by how in meditation we give the mind a simple task—just be with the breath—and it's hard enough just to do that, to link together five or ten breaths with strong mindfulness. Yet the Buddha was able to see the entirety of the mind and all the ways it manifests, showing with such clarity what might be called a map of the inner landscape.

This is one teaching you're very familiar with, I think. He taught, and we can see for ourselves, that when we act motivated by greed or by hatred or by delusion, suffering follows. When we act motivated by generosity or by love or by wisdom, it becomes the source of happiness in our lives. In this regard, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that everything rests on the tip of motivation.

In our investigation of our own experience, our own hearts and minds, we need to really focus and understand and become aware of the motivations behind our actions. But this is not so easy to do. We might understand on an intellectual level that motivation is a really important aspect, and that understanding aligns with our values. But how often do we actually apply it in our lives? In the midst of our daily lives, do we stop and reflect before we act? What's the motivation here? Probably not that often, because motivations can be very subtle and sometimes hard to see. They're often mixed.

Here there's a powerful intersection between the understanding that everything rests on the tip of motivation and our mindfulness practice. While in the course of our normal lives motivations may be hard to pick up if we haven't trained ourselves, in meditation, through practicing being mindful of motivations, we get much more skilled in becoming aware of them—even outside of meditation, just as we're living our lives.

There's one arena of activity in which I've found this exploration of motivation to be particularly fruitful: the whole arena of speech. Not when you're on a silent meditation retreat, of course, but in the midst of our daily lives we speak a lot. In terms of all the interactions we have in a day, speech is a very prominent part of our life experience.

Just as an aside, one of the many lists in Buddhism enumerates the ten wholesome and unwholesome actions. Of the ten, four of them have to do with speech. That shows the importance the Buddha gave to being mindful, aware, and discerning about our speech and the motivation behind it.

As many of you know, the Buddha outlined four types of wrong speech: lying, backbiting, harsh words, and useless talk. I'm not a Pali scholar, but the word in Pali for useless talk is my favorite Pali word: *samphappalāpa*. It sounds just like what it is. I have found this, as well as the other three categories, to be such an interesting place to practice.

I can be hanging out with friends in a social situation, just conversing, and so often I can see in my mind an impulse to say something that is totally useless. It has no bearing on anything except perhaps to announce, "Here I am, pronouncing my presence." At those times when I can see that impulse, the motivation to *samphappalāpa*, and I'm mindful enough to refrain, it always feels great.

It feels like a conservation of energy rather than a dissipation of energy.

So again, this is a fun way of practice, because we really have a direct application of seeing the importance of being mindful of our motivation before we speak or before we act.

What's so significant about this whole process—the whole process of exploring our minds and our actions—is that none of it depends on blind belief or dogma. And again, this is one of the things that first attracted me to the Buddhist teachings. It was not about demanding belief. The Buddha wasn't saying, "Come, you must believe this." It was always framed as, "Come and see, come and investigate for yourself." This is my understanding coming out of my realization of what brings happiness and what causes suffering—check it out.

And I love that, because then our entire lives become the laboratory of our understanding. We're testing out in ourselves, for ourselves, in our own experience.

So there's this real focus on becoming aware of motivation before our actions. But another arena of investigation—of our minds, of our experience—which I've found hugely helpful in my practice and in my life, and I've talked about this a lot in recent years, is condensed in one phrase which I now use often: don't waste your suffering.

Although external circumstances in our lives will of course impact our experience, and sometimes there are very troublesome or even harmful or unpleasant experiences that come in the course of a lifetime—no one is exempt from that—how we relate to

those experiences is completely up to us. No one makes us relate to difficult feelings or emotions or situations in a particular way. That's totally within our capacity: to see how we can relate to this in a wise way.

This doesn't mean that unpleasant things are going to stop happening to us from time to time or even frequently. But it does mean that we can train ourselves and learn to relate to these unpleasant experiences, whatever they may be—in the body, in our emotions, in relationships. How we relate to them is up to us.

One example of this, one of my favorites, is from the Zen master poet Ryokan. He lived in the 1800s, I think, and he was this monk in Japan who lived alone in the mountains, very poor. He wrote a lot of haiku and poetry, and he would wander around and play with the village children. There are wonderful stories about his life.

So he lived in this kind of ramshackle hut up in the mountains someplace, with very few possessions. One day he came back to his hut and everything had been stolen. What did he do? He wrote a haiku: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

Now I wonder how we would be if we came back to our house and everything was stolen. Would we be writing haikus? "Oh, the moon at the window. I'm so glad they've left it." Probably not. But I love the story because it just points to this truth: yes, our minds can be developed or trained to relate in skillful ways. And if we don't quite become great haiku poets, we might at least develop strength in the quality of equanimity—realizing that lots of things happen in our lives, some we enjoy, some we don't. Have we developed a capacity to hold all of that without adding more mental suffering to the situation?

This is particularly revealing, and it has been for me in my practice. We can be going along and for whatever reason there's some suffering in the mind, which really means some difficult emotion—might be frustration or sadness or anger or desire or anxiety. There's a whole long list of them. So when I'm either in formal practice or just in my life, and something comes up that's disturbing, my mind is no longer at ease.

By "don't waste your suffering," I mean don't deny it or try to push it away. Don't avoid it. Don't waste your suffering means taking an interest: okay, this unpleasant emotion is arising in me—can I investigate it, can I explore it? Not only can I explore the energy of the emotion itself, taking interest—oh, anger feels like this, or sadness feels like this, or anxiety feels like this—but when we have that interest, in those moments we're not particularly identified with that emotion.

We're actually being mindful of it. And so we learn something.

Then we also want to check out what is the attitude in our mind about this emotion. Just as an example, suppose there's anxiety. Do we just have aversion to it, not like it, try to get rid of it in whatever way we can? Or if we're checking the attitude in our mind, we might notice, "Oh, there's aversion here." And then we can settle back into that quality of acceptance—the ability to open to it, to feel it without reactivity.

Years ago, many years ago, the most afflictive emotion coming up for me in my practice was fear. It wasn't fear about anything in particular. It was just free-floating fear, but it was really strong. I worked with it for a long time, noting it: "Fear, fear, fear." But it just felt locked in.

Then at a certain point—and this took a long time for me to realize—I was doing some walking meditation, the fear was coming up, but then something switched. That switch was reflected in the thought: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay. It's okay." And I realized that was the first moment in all of that time that I was truly accepting of it. Because even though I had known it was there and I was noting it, I was not being mindful.

This highlighted for me the difference between recognition and mindfulness. We often confuse the two. We think if we're recognizing what's there, it means we're being mindful. But that's not necessarily so. We can be recognizing something through the filter of aversion or through the filter of attachment. Mindfulness means yes, we do recognize what's there, but then there's that extra quality of acceptance—it's okay.

For me, "it's okay" became the magic mantra. Whatever I was going through: it's okay to feel this. It's okay. And that acceptance then made possible the real exploration of it.

So, everything rests on the tip of motivation. We've explored that arena—don't waste your suffering, which means when we are suffering in some way, that is a fantastic opportunity to understand on a deeper level the patterns of our conditioning, what's causing the suffering, and ways of letting go.

There's one more arena of investigation, again in response to the question "Why meditate?" The Buddha highlighted this so often in his teachings: the importance and many implications of seeing impermanence on more and more refined levels. How do we relate to the simple fact that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away? And what has the nature to arise? Everything. Everything has the nature to arise and therefore will pass away.

A couple of years ago, I came across a phrase in the texts which I had previously overlooked. It highlighted this insight into impermanence, made it more vivid just in the language of it. It said: "Everything is always becoming otherwise." It's kind of an unusual phrase in English. But because of that, it just highlights—yes, everything is always becoming otherwise, changing.

I could be going for a walk and maybe I get a twinge in my knee. And now: "Oh, becoming otherwise." Instead of "Oh, why did that happen?" and ruminating about it all—no, it's just things becoming otherwise all the time.

There are two phrases which encapsulate this understanding. One is a phrase I've used a lot: anything can happen anytime. Things are not as stable as we would like them to be. Anything can happen anytime.

Going along fine, feeling healthy, and all of a sudden some illness arises. There are countless examples of anything can happen anytime—and sometimes really good things can happen at any time.

The other phrase, which the Buddha emphasized in one powerful reflection, he said we should really cultivate and practice every day. He gave emphasis to this reflection for the deepening of our practice. He said this is what we should reflect on: Whatever has the nature to grow old will grow old. Whatever has the nature to become ill will become ill. And whatever has the nature to die will die. This is just nature.

But here's the tagline: And I am not exempt.

I have found that to be such a powerful reminder. Because as we go through our lives with various expressions of becoming older, becoming ill, and maybe even in a dying process—and I see it in myself, even with little things—even though intellectually I know I am not exempt, I can see in myself that deep feeling: *Well, I should be exempt.* There's some very deep refusal to acknowledge the dharma of all of this. It's just nature. It's just the law. It's not a mistake.

But if we don't attend to that, then we get attached to things staying the way we want them to stay, the way we like them. If we're attached to summer, how do we feel in winter? If we're attached to youth, how do we feel as we're getting older? If we're attached to health and vigor, how do we feel when we become ill?

It's so clear that if we are not aware in a living way—not in a theoretical or intellectual way, but if we're actually living and practicing this understanding that things are always becoming otherwise and we are not exempt—as we integrate that more and more deeply into our lives, we navigate all these changes with much greater ease.

All of this comes out of our refinement of perception of change.

One question that might arise at different times: when we hear all this, we may wonder, if everything's changing all the time and everything is always becoming otherwise, what's the point of doing anything? Having relationships, striving for goals, working for the good—if everything is always in flux, what becomes the motivation for acting in skillful ways?

There are a couple of distinctions which are very helpful to understand in our lives and also specifically in our meditation practice. The first is understanding the difference between attachment and commitment. Attachment means we want something to stay the way it is—whether it's a relationship, whether it's some pleasant experience. Attachment or clinging says, "Stay this way." Of course, that's impossible. Commitment means that we can have a steadiness toward an aspiration, toward a goal, through all the changes. The commitment can be there.

This relates to another distinction, which is between expectation and aspiration. An aspiration basically sets the goal for our practice, for our lives. We aspire to become more aware. We aspire to become more compassionate. We aspire to be more generous. The aspiration sets the direction and the goal. Expectation means that we want things to be the way we want them when we want them.

A good example of this, which I've experienced countless times in my practice: I can be having a sitting and—in what we would call, not in a very skillful way, but we all do it—I would have what I call a "good sitting." What we think is good really means it's pleasant, right? So we're having a good sitting. The mind is somewhat concentrated, the body feels at ease, it's all going along very smoothly. And then we think, "Finally, I got it. Finally, I got this meditation thing." We get up and can't wait to come back to the next sitting.

We can sit down and the mind is restless, or it's bored, or there's pain in the body. Things are always becoming otherwise. We can have the aspiration to greater ease, greater clarity, greater understanding—with the understanding that there will be endless ups and downs. It's like a sine curve, up and down and up and down. But the slope of the curve is going up. Attachment or expectation is trying to fix things, which is counter to the understanding of the great truth of change.

I want to say a few words about the last area of exploration in answer to the question, why meditate? This has to do with something very subtle, hard to understand, really counterintuitive—it goes against our common understanding of things. And that is the Buddhist teaching on selflessness or non-self.

We have the idea, commonly, that there is some essential self, someone behind all experience to whom it is happening. That's the I. That's the self. And this felt sense of self is deeply habituated. Our lives revolve around it. So it would be worth investigating. If, as the Buddha taught, there is no self, no permanent being to whom things are happening, then it would be interesting to explore how that felt sense comes about. Because it's so prevalent, so predominant—how does it arise in the first place if it's not there?

Understanding how it arises is not complicated. It arises whenever there's identification with momentary experience. A thought arises: I'm thinking. Or my thought—we're identifying with it. The same with different emotions: love, anger, fear, joy. I'm angry, I'm fearful, I'm joyful. With all of these, the I is extra. Each of these experiences—whether thoughts, emotions, or feelings in the body—they're all arising impersonally due to various causes and conditions, manifesting their own nature, and passing away.

So it's love that loves. It's fear that fears. It's joy that joys. The thought is the thinker. There's no I behind it. It's not that they are referring back to a self. They're just arising due to the various conditions, manifesting their nature, passing away when the conditions change. But we're so habituated to identify with all of this phenomena. And it's that identification which creates that very deeply felt sense of self.

Our practice really takes us to tremendous depth of understanding, to a transformative way of understanding what this whole process is about. It's important to understand that this is not just a philosophic inquiry, although it is interesting on that level. But it's a way of understanding through which we can free our hearts and minds from the clinging and attachment and identification that is the cause of suffering in ourselves and other people.

Through this understanding—and this is what may be unrecognized for a while—this understanding of the selfless, impersonal nature of phenomena leads directly to a compassionate engagement with the world. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, another of the great Tibetan masters, offered a teaching that inspires me so much. He said, "When you recognize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena, then the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

I love that. Compassionate activity is the manifestation of the realization, the understanding of the empty selfless nature of phenomena. One little phrase I like: compassion is the activity of emptiness. We bring together this transformative realization about our own experience, about the nature of our own minds, and see how it directly manifests in terms of caring and compassion for the world.

All of this is really in response to the question, why meditate? I hope some of this resonated with you and perhaps helped to create some areas of interest for further exploration.

Let's sit for just a couple of minutes and let all the words settle.

May all beings everywhere be at peace.

Thank you all. I hope you continue to have a wonderful, revealing rest of retreat. It is a fantastic thing to be doing—really a privilege to have the opportunity to be doing it.

Many good wishes, and thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 75

# Q & A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h11

---

> *In this question and response session from an Insight Meditation retreat, Joseph Goldstein addresses over 100 questions submitted by participants, weaving together practical guidance with profound insights into the nature of experience.*
>
> *Goldstein begins by exploring why the wisdom of impermanence (aniccā) can initially feel like 'cold comfort,' explaining that resistance to change—not change itself—is the source of suffering. Using the vivid analogy of rope burn, he illustrates how grasping at changing phenomena creates dukkha, while settling into the flow of impermanence brings ease and even joy. He describes the progressive stages of vipassanā practice, from initial effort through the challenging 'rolling up the mat' stage of dissolution, to the profound equanimity that becomes the ground for awakening.*
>
> *The talk offers a particularly illuminating exploration of anattā (selflessness) through the practice of reframing experience in the passive voice—'sensations being known' rather than 'I am knowing sensations.' This linguistic shift removes the implicit self from experience, revealing how rapidly changing phenomena create only the illusion of a continuous self, like separate frames of film creating the appearance of a story. Goldstein playfully suggests we can learn to step in and out of 'the film' of our lives, finding rest in moments of direct seeing.*
>
> *Practical techniques for working with obsessive thoughts include 'dead end' noting, the 'sword of wisdom,' and what he calls 'cowboy dharma'—cutting off seductive thought patterns before they gain momentum. The session concludes with guidance on balancing equanimity and compassion when engaging with social upheaval, offering both cosmic perspective and the question 'How can I help?' as a way of life.*

Good evening.

I hope you all wrote a lot of easy questions. We used to call these Q&As—questions and answers. We changed it to Q&Rs, questions and responses. So we'll see whether it actually answers your questions or not.

Thank you for being here, and thank you for all of your questions. I had the difficult task of going through over a hundred questions you offered, categorizing and narrowing them down. I've combined some of these questions, and we'll see what time we have to address them. Apologies for not being able to get to every question, but I'm looking forward to the responses that do come.

A little context: we've been doing the Anicca chant each evening, so impermanence has been on some minds. I'll start with these two questions. The first: "The wisdom of impermanence has often seemed like a cold comfort. What is the path from accepting impermanence to happiness, as the Anicca chant refers to?" And the second: "How can I work with my fear of impermanence?"

It's not uncommon, I think, for people—when they hear that everything is changing—to feel that this is cold or uninviting to really explore. What's a little odd about that is that it's exactly the opposite. When we look to see the basic cause of suffering in our lives, it's because we are in one way or another trying to hold on or to want or to crave that which in its very nature is impermanent. I think I talked about this the other night.

It's precisely by settling into the flow of changes, both externally but specifically in the meditation, that ease arises. This is really what happens as the samadhi, the concentration, deepens. There's a certain momentum or flow that begins to happen, and we are simply in the flow of changing phenomena. When we're in that flow without trying to hold on, without trying to grasp, there's a tremendous sense of ease and openness.

A meditator once came into an interview describing their insight into impermanence. They said, "Trying to hold on to that which is changing is like rope burn. If you're holding onto a rope that's being pulled through your hand, the tighter you hold on, the more rope burn there's going to be."

What's interesting is just to really notice in our lives how often we do that. We can understand intellectually that this makes sense. But our conditioning, our habit, is that we like what's pleasant, we don't like what's unpleasant, and this results in a lot of holding, wanting, and craving—which is the cause of distress and unease in our lives.

So actually, opening to the truth of change—not only opening to it but dropping into the flow of it—is really quite joyful at times. It's always peaceful because we're not fighting against the way things are.

The second question was about a conditioned fear of change. I think I mentioned in the talk the other night that experience where I had a little accident walking, and then came the understanding: anything can happen anytime. It's relevant here because the first reaction to that was fear—oh my God, anything can happen anytime. But as I settled into it, the heart relaxed, because it got attuned to the truth of change and the acceptance of that. As we accept it, there's ease in the face of inevitable changes.

Even on a conceptual level—and what I'm talking about is really developing this understanding in our practice, so it's experiential—but even conceptually, being afraid of impermanence is like being afraid of gravity. It's the way things are. The more we can see that and open to it, the more we get over that conditioned fear. We're just in the experience and the acceptance of the flow, and it's actually quite easeful.

Maybe one more, tangentially related to how we can have different perceptions. There was an example of a person's experience jumping out of a plane. The first hit was tremendous exhilaration—an incredibly exciting experience. Then they realized they didn't have a parachute. So there was tremendous fear. And then they realized, in this particular story, there's no ground. As soon as they realized there was no ground, the heart and mind just settled into the experience of the free flow of things.

This description really is applicable to some of the stages we go through in Vipassana practice. As the practice deepens and as the concentration gets a little better—it doesn't have to be a super amount, but enough so that the hindrances are not quite so activated—there's a stage of practice where we are seeing, experiencing the rapid rise and fall of phenomena on a momentary level. It's very rapid, very quick.

At that stage, the mind is filled with light, crystal clear, and extremely joyful. But that's just a stage in the unfolding practice. We keep on practicing, sitting and walking, and then it evolves into a stage where we are just seeing the dissolving side of impermanence—not so much things arising, but the continual disappearance of things. The mind becomes attuned to that at this particular stage.

When we're in that stage, it's called the "rolling up the mat" stage because it's so disconcerting. There's no stability anyplace. We're just seeing things dissolving all the time. There's no place to take a stand. So there can be a lot of fear at that time, because we're not looking at it from the outside—we're experiencing this whole mind-body process dissolving, dissolving, dissolving. That's why they call it rolling up the mat; that's what people want to do, just roll up the mat and go home.

But then we keep practicing, and we go through that stage until it comes to a place of profound equanimity—a fantastically peaceful quality of mind where the mind is not affected, not reactive to whether things are pleasant or unpleasant. It's just like vast space, and everything is simply arising and passing. This is tremendously fulfilling and easeful. During that time, people can sit for hours; the body feels light. And it's out of that stage, like the ground out of which these moments of enlightenment can happen.

So it's just to say that there's a progression. It's not just one kind of experience that unfolds in our practice. Sometimes it's joyful, sometimes it's fearful, and sometimes it's equanimous. It might be helpful to have that in mind as you go through many different kinds of experience in practice. When it's difficult, it doesn't mean it's bad meditation. It just means that's the phase we happen to be going through, seeing things in a particular way at that time.

This speaks directly to a question that was asked: Could you describe the relationship between selflessness and the rapid movement of attention? The insight into impermanence... let me back up. Have people heard about the three characteristics? The three general characteristics of experience are impermanence, dukkha (the unsatisfying nature), and selflessness. Impermanence and dukkha are easy to understand. Selflessness is not quite so easy to understand. But one doorway into getting glimpses of what the Buddha was referring to, and how we can experience it, is through the doorway of impermanence. There are other ways of experiencing it as well, but this is a rather accessible one because impermanence is very clear. It's not some esoteric truth.

Especially as the mind becomes stronger, as the qualities of mindfulness and concentration get strengthened—which is really what you're doing here in practice, strengthening those qualities—at a certain point, it really becomes effortless. There's enough momentum of those qualities that they're working by themselves.

Here's one image that describes this point of shift in our practice. In the beginning, if you think of an arch, you're kind of balancing on the top of it. The mind falls off—you fall off on one side and have to struggle to get back, fall off on the other side. It's very effortful. We do that a lot in the beginning of our meditation journey.

At a certain point, the arch becomes a trough, and we're just balanced at the bottom of it. The mind still gets pulled out from that place of center, but it falls back naturally to that place of balance. That's a development in the practice as we strengthen these qualities of mindfulness and concentration. It really becomes quite easeful, even when difficult things are happening. This doesn't mean that in that place of ease it's all blissful—challenging things can still come up.

but we've established ourselves in the flow that's just carrying us along without much effort at that point, except for that resolve to stay with it.

When we're in that flow and we continue the practice, our perception of change gets really refined. We can just see—something I call NPMs, noticings per minute. In the beginning, the NPMs are pretty low. Maybe five NPMs or ten. But at a certain point, and you can see this even with something as simple as being with the breath or being with

the step—at first, okay, in-breath, out-breath. In-breath is one thing, out-breath is another. But as we get more centered and connected, the in-breath is made up of so many more microscopic sensations. The breath is not one thing. It's like that. And we can feel and experience the rapidity, the microscopic nature of what's going on.

Another example: What do you hear? The sound of a bell. But if we're really listening, it's not one thing. There's so much going on in that short interval. So as our practice deepens in this way, and we're feeling the whole mind-body process with these high NPMs, nothing lasts long enough to consider it as self. Because the notion of self, the very concept of it, implies something stable. Everything is happening to a "me," and the "me" is just there throughout one's whole life. But when we are really paying attention to the truth of our experience, it's not like that. It's just this rapidity of changing mental and physical phenomena arising and passing very quickly.

Another image which I've been playing with lately came up on my self-retreat. It involves walking meditation. And I hope you are doing the walking, because sometimes people have the idea that the sitting is the real thing and the walking is kind of an interlude between the sittings. There is so much that can be learned in the walk. In some ways, more insight has come to me in walking than in sitting. So that's just a plug for you not to overlook it.

I was doing walking meditation, and I want to share something with you: the passive voice. This is one really effective way of having an immediate experience or taste or glimpse of selflessness. A lot of how we experience ourselves and the world and life is conditioned by language. The language we use conditions how we see things and how we understand things.

In English, and in many languages, the usual way we construct sentences is subject, verb, object. I'm going here, I'm going there. I feel happy, I feel sad. That's called the active voice. The passive voice would be something like "a sound being known" or "a sound being heard" rather than "I'm hearing a sound."

At one point in my practice—I don't even know how it arose—but somehow it came, and it was in walking meditation. I suddenly started framing the experience in the passive voice. Sensations being known. Just as a little exercise, if you move your arm, see if you can frame it as "the movement being known." You can move it quickly, slowly, but it's being known rather than framing it as "I'm knowing the movement."

The power of this is that in the passive voice, there's no "I." Just through a change of language, we've taken the self out of it. And so we're describing the experience to ourselves

in a selfless way. It's just things being known. Sound being known, a thought being known, a sensation being known. And what's so powerful about this is that it's being known effortlessly. You don't have to do anything. It's happening all by itself. The movement is being known—effortlessly and perfectly. Not a moment before, not a moment after. It's exactly in each moment, something being known without any reference to a self, to an I.

In terms of impermanence and selflessness, I was doing walking meditation, just walking in this open kind of way, not limited to the sensation of movement being known, but moment after moment simply being aware of whatever's being known. Sound being known, a sensation in the body, the feeling of the breeze, thought being known. Moment after moment—things being known, being known, being known.

And all of a sudden, I had the image of a film. Usually we're totally caught up in the story of the film. But what is the film? It's really just separate frames moving really quickly. Because they're moving so fast, it feels like there's a continuity. Characters are built up, actions are built up, and the whole world of the story is created. But what's really happening? Is anybody on the screen getting chased or falling in love or getting murdered? No, it's just separate frames of film and pixels of light. Because it's happening so quickly, there's the illusion of continuity.

The sense of self and the deeply conditioned feeling of self is very strong in all of us. That's why it's so hard to really get a glimpse of what the Buddha was talking about. But if you're practicing in a way that incorporates this passive voice construction, even in how you're languaging it to yourself, you're not reinforcing "I'm walking" or "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." You're taking the I out of it—movement being known, happiness being known, sadness being known, sound being known. And then you see how rapidly it's happening. It's just like separate frames of the film. You see there is no one there. No self there, no abiding self there. But it's happening so quickly that we have this sense of continuity.

I was just playing with this, doing the walking meditation, thinking my whole experience is just like frames of a film. And then I was playing with the idea of being a character in the film—we all are. We're all stars of our own movies. It would be like a character in the film suddenly realizing that in any moment, it's just a film frame. Almost like the character steps out of the film and understands what's really going on, then steps back into the film and continues with the story. That's kind of what we're doing.

One of the through lines that pulls us back, that sustains the illusion of the whole story, the illusion of self, is the force of craving, of wanting. That's the mental energy that keeps us in the film.

The challenge for us—we're all laypeople in the world, not monastics devoting our whole lives to having stepped out of the film. Not that they always do, but that's the idea of living that life. We're engaged in the world. We're engaged with other people and relationships. So for myself, I just find it extremely interesting to learn how to play with being in the film and stepping out of it. Being in the film and stepping out of it at different times, because it's a way of finding or connecting with some sense of greater peace. We're so caught up in the turmoil of our lives and the turmoil of the world—especially these days, but really always.

So where is the rest in all of that? Where is the peace if we're continually immersed in this film of our lives, this film of the world? But when we have the ability to step back—I don't know, back when I was a kid there was a show on Broadway called *Stop the World, I Want to Get Off*. This is kind of like that. These are moments where we just understand things on a much more fundamental level, and there's a quality of peace, a quality of rest, even if it's just for a few moments.

I think that's our challenge as lay people practicing with an aspiration to be free, with an aspiration for the deepest kind of peace. How do we do it in the midst of our busy lives? This is one way. I hope this made sense. For me it was just a very clear and engaging understanding, and I started playing with it, as you can.

A question came in: "I understand the truth that for all of us, inevitably, everything ends in separation. While I understand this truth, how does one cultivate love for someone free of attachment?"

One of the phrases my teacher Munindraji used to say very often about Dharma practice in general was, "It's simple, but not easy." It's not complicated, but as you all know, it's not always easy.

One way of really seeing clearly the possibility of love without attachment is first to get very clear in your own experience of when each of those qualities—love and attachment—are operative in the mind and heart. For example, at any time when you feel particularly loving, whether with a spouse or partner, children, friends, or in any situation where you recognize that quality of the heart, if you can remember, just pay attention in those moments to really see and feel: what does this feel like? Learn to recognize very clearly that love feels like this.

Usually we have these emotions and we go through them, either liking or not liking them, but it's not often that we remember to actually investigate. What is the actual quality of this emotion? Because we're having it at that moment, it's right there for us to see. We don't have to be looking for it or waiting for it. It's already here. Oh, love feels like this. Spend some time exploring that feeling.

Then pay attention in your experience to when you feel most attached. For whatever reason, that feeling of attachment or clinging to another person—or I could even say wanting in some way—is there. Without judgment, just pay attention to what that feels like.

In my experience, they are two completely opposite feelings. When I feel most loving, it's the energy of generosity—a generosity of the heart, just wanting the other person to be well, to be happy. It's that giving. When I've experienced the most attachment, it's exactly the opposite. It's the energy of holding on.

Then we could really examine: what's the consequence, what's the result of each of those feelings? When we're loving, does it bring about more happiness or more suffering? When we're attached or holding on, what does that bring? It never brings more happiness. It's always the source of some kind of contraction or tightness or fear—fear of losing something. All kinds of things are born from attachment.

If we can clearly distinguish the difference—not theoretically, but from our own experience of how we're feeling these emotions—and see each clearly, and then see where each leads, that could be a strong motivation to practice cultivating love. And when we're feeling attachment, as everyone will until we're quite enlightened, at least we can recognize it and see something that goes quite against our usual way of understanding. Most people feel that attachment is an inextricable part of loving. Of course I'll be attached to the person I love—that's our usual understanding. But it's because people have not really investigated that they're two different things, and in a way, opposite things.

So it is possible, but this is a lifelong practice, because the attachment we have to the people we love is very strongly conditioned. It's not going to go away magically. But we don't have to simply live out this habitual pattern of conditioning if we understand the right way to investigate it and see through it.

That's why, when you meet people who have cultivated this to a very great extent, they're extraordinary beings. Some of our teachers—think of the Dalai Lama. He had one line, something like...

I try to be with everyone I meet as an old friend. That's how he goes through the world. And you never get the feeling that he's attached to the person. He's just loving them. Many great beings manifest that quality. So for me, it's an inspiration that it's possible. But it takes that kind of investigation and clear seeing—again, not theoretically, but in our actual experience.

*Thank you.*

The next question: When in our practice do we let go, and when do we investigate? For example, when we have obsessive thoughts. And can you also say more about how to let go?

*Did you say obsessive thoughts?*

Obsessive thoughts, yes.

I'm contemplating something. What I'm about to say is provisional, so I might change my mind—but I'm not sure that investigation and letting go are opposites. Let's just put that up there and consider it.

I also want to make a distinction between insight and investigation. In one way, it's the mental factor—and now I'm getting into a little Buddhist jargon—but there are seven factors of enlightenment in the Buddhist teachings. These seven factors all have to be cultivated and brought into balance: mindfulness and investigation and effort and energy and rapture and calm and equanimity and concentration.

Investigation is the wisdom factor of mind. So wisdom—the wisdom factor of mind—is also what gives rise to wisdom. We're seeing things, understanding things that we didn't see before.

This wisdom, this insight, can happen in two ways. Sometimes it's just intuitive. It's not that we've necessarily chosen to investigate anything in particular, but we're just going along—sitting, being with the breath, other objects arising, or walking—and then, all of a sudden, we're seeing something that we hadn't seen before.

So the wisdom is there, the insight is there, but it's not necessarily from what we would call investigation, which—the word in English, at least—implies a more active energy. Intuitive insight is often a more receptive energy, where it just arises naturally.

The place where investigation I have found to be most helpful is what I talked about the other night when I was discussing "don't waste your suffering." That is such a fruitful place for investigation. Because at that time, if we're suffering, it means we are not

being receptive at that moment. We're caught up in some kind of mental drama or conflict, and we're just lost in it—which is why there's some kind of distress, some kind of suffering.

So at that time, an active investigation can really be helpful. I do this a lot. When I'm feeling just out of balance in some way, I'll ask myself, "Well, what's going on in my mind now that's causing the distress?" And it's never about what it is that's happening. It's always about how I'm relating to what's happening.

This is the key point of meditation practice. How often do we get caught in the idea—you know, you have a sitting, not on retreat but maybe at home, and then somebody asks you, "How was your sit?" "I had a good sitting. It was a good sitting." What does that usually mean? It means it was pleasant. The body felt okay, the mind was calm. Good sitting. But if we were bored, restless, in pain—oh, terrible sitting.

That is completely the wrong measure. But this is what we do very often. Because we could be having a very pleasant sitting and hardly be mindful at all. We were just enjoying it and going with the flow. *This is nice. I hope this lasts.* And we could have a really difficult sitting and really be investigating, really be learning from it.

It's very hard to get out of that conditioning—that pleasant means good and unpleasant means bad in terms of meditation. This is just so essential: to come out of that frame. Because the pleasant-unpleasant

That's just following its own laws in our life. We don't have much control over that.

And the Buddha gave one teaching on this which is really so direct. He said, as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. That is as direct a pointing to what we need to be cultivating in our practice. But it so goes against our conditioning, because we all like what's pleasant and we don't like what's unpleasant.

And that's why, going back to what I was saying a little earlier, that stage of equanimity is so powerful in our practice. When our mind has kind of reached that level of understanding and experience, it is non-reactive to pleasant and unpleasant. We're experiencing both—it's not that we're unaware of whether something is pleasant or unpleasant—but that's not the source of any reactivity. There's just an impartiality.

"What was the question?" someone asked. "When do you let go and when do you investigate? For example, with obsessive thoughts."

So investigating when we feel contracted in one way or another—that is really a good time to investigate. Investigating the way we're relating to whatever the experience is. Am I holding on? Am I pushing away? Am I ignoring? We really take a look at all that.

With obsessive thoughts, over the course of many years of practice, I have developed so many different techniques. I'll share with you some of the ways I've worked with them, but I'd really encourage you just to explore. When that's going on, try different things. My basic mantra for meditation technique is: whatever works.

So a few examples. This goes back quite a few years, but at one point in my practice earlier on, a theme that is not unusual emerged: having a lot of sexual fantasies. I'd be sitting, and my mind was still in a certain kind of way, and just all these fantasies would arise. And they were really enjoyable—the hour went really quickly. But after a while I thought, come on, Joseph. But they were so seductive.

So I was playing with a lot of different ways of working with that category. One approach: I started using the phrase "dead end," because I realized they're not going anyplace. It's not that they were going to get fulfilled—I was just sitting there, my mind spinning in them. And then finally they'd come to an end and I'd be back feeling my breath again. So it was like a dead end.

I started using that note at the beginning of them rather than waiting. So when those fantasies or desires would come up, I would remind myself, "Oh, dead end, dead end." And at times that was enough—okay, this is not going anyplace, stay with the practice.

Another approach I used at a different time: in the Tibetan iconography, there's this great Bodhisattva Manjushri, who is depicted with a sword of wisdom. So at one point, when these fantasies were going on and on and on, I said, "Okay, enough." It's like I took out my sword of wisdom. Enough.

The key in doing that is not to do it with aversion, because how one does it is important. But sometimes, in meditative circles and meditation teachings, there is a lot of emphasis on the yes—yes to things, allow things, be open to things.

So there is a lot of emphasis on openness, which is certainly necessary—just be open and receptive and allow. But equally important to the yes is the wise no. This is where we see clearly: this is not skillful, this is not helpful, it's not leading anyplace. So it's not just, "Oh, okay, allow it." No. At that time, no. Enough.

It would be like raising a child and never saying no—you'd have a monster. Well, our minds are a bit like that. So we need to learn that capacity for the wise no.

Now, one last approach. This one is actually my favorite, though I have to say the language may be slightly politically incorrect—it's on the border.

I was on retreat once, a two-month self-retreat with a couple of friends. And skipping all the details, something happened. My back was hurting, and I thought I'd go out for just a simple chiropractic adjustment, which I've had many, many times. So I went out, had this adjustment, and it was a disaster. For whatever reason—it seemed like it was just an ordinary thing—my body went into shock. This became a three-year ordeal. It was really, really difficult.

So I went back to retreat and I knew something really bad had happened. And my mind kept going on and on, obsessively: how could I have been so stupid to go in the middle of a retreat to get this adjustment? And look what happened. I was just berating myself for having done something so stupid with that consequence.

I was lost. Those thoughts would come and I could be gone for half an hour in that train. It was really hard—one of the hardest times in my practice ever.

But at a certain point, when I realized I was just getting caught again and again, I recognized that it was that particular thought—"How could I have been so stupid?"—that was so seductive, because I thought it was true. I understood that if I didn't catch that thought immediately, I'd be gone.

So I developed what I called cowboy dharma. Every time the first words of that thought came—"How can I..."—I would mentally draw my six-shooter and shoot the thought down. It worked, because I realized I could not give that thought any airtime at all. It was too obsessive, too seductive.

So feel free to explore this approach. I found it actually helpful to use the mudra. Here in public you might want to skip the sound effects, but you could do it silently.

I wanted to give an indication of the whole range of ways we can extricate ourselves from unwholesome thought patterns—whether it's "enough" or "dead end" or cowboy dharma or whatever. Play with it. Explore and see for yourselves what works. But it's helpful to develop some skills and some tools for how to come out of recurring unwholesome patterns.

Because who's suffering? We're the ones who are suffering. And so that itself can be an inspiration to really explore and investigate with interest.

This will be the last question of the evening. Knowing that there is upheaval and division in our country with consequences that are rippling out across the planet, in this situation, is social activism a part of the Buddhist path, and what might that look like?

I think there are two really important qualities that we can develop in our practice that can provide a framework for engaging with the world in a skillful way. One I've been talking a little bit about is the development of equanimity—so that we're not responding out of our own reactivity, which generally just adds to the confusion. We want to come, in some way, to find a place of balance in ourselves in the midst of all the turmoil and the suffering that's going on. People find different ways of doing this.

For me, one way of coming back to some greater place of equanimity in the midst of everything that's going on is just a deep historical perspective on things. This stuff has been going on forever. It's not that it's new to this time. I've been listening to a book called *The Fall of Civilizations*. It's really an amazing book. The author has traced civilizations from ancient Sumeria through the Assyrians and the Phoenicians and the Romans, and the Chinese, and the Indians, and the Aztecs, and the Mayans—just throughout the centuries all around the globe. He traces and describes civilizations coming into being, flourishing, becoming powerful, declining, and collapsing. He describes the conditions of how it happened in each case—what were the causes of these powerful civilizations declining.

It was so powerful to see that these are historical cycles, just like we are born and grow old and die. Societies and civilizations go through the same cycles, and largely for a lot of the same reasons. It was really interesting. A lot of the decline of many of these civilizations happened because of some degree of climate change in that particular area where they could no longer sustain the growing population from their flourishing time—either drought or different climatic changes. Another cause was the chaos from successions of leadership. Things can be very stable and then leadership changes, whether in the old days it was kings or otherwise. And if the new leadership doesn't have the same wisdom or understanding, it often results in tremendous decline and chaos and conflict.

When I'm listening to this, it helps me understand what's happening now in a larger context. This is just part of the long historical unfolding process, and it's inevitable. It's not an aberration. This has been happening always. So that's one thing, just getting some sense of equanimity through the historical framework.

Another framework that brings about this sense of equanimity for me is the cosmological one. Are you familiar at all with the famous essay by Carl Sagan, "The Pale Blue Dot"? For those of you who aren't, he was describing what the Earth looks like from out-

er space. It's just this tiny, tiny blue dot in the vastness of the cosmos. And he goes on to describe how everything in our lives, all the drama, everything—the great things and the difficult and the suffering—everything is just happening on this tiny little dot in immense, immense space. From that perspective, I really appreciate it. Sometimes I go out at night and just look up at the stars and think, what am I upset about? It's just so small in the vastness of things. It changes how I'm holding things.

So that's one half of it. The other half is this: from that place of equanimity, somewhat greater equanimity or somewhat greater sense of peace with it all, then there is compassion for the very real suffering that's going on as all these changes are taking place. It's not to just withdraw into cosmic indifference. But we can use the equanimity to allow us to connect with the very real suffering that is going on for so many people—not so much from a place of reactivity or anger, which in the long run doesn't help, but from a place of compassion.

The phrase that I've used a lot was the title of a book by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman back in the seventies or so. The title of the book was *How Can I Help?* And I love that phrase as a way to live one's life. Can we go through life with that phrase being our basic motivation in terms of how we relate to other people, to the world? How can I help? Then it's a question of really seeing: where and how can I help?

And there are many things, many situations of suffering where there is nothing we can do about it. It is beyond either our capacity or domain, or where we have no agency or influence. And that's where we rest in equanimity—okay, this is how it is. But there are many arenas where there is opportunity to help.

I think if we really hold that question in a very unpretentious way—because maybe it's just helping a friend, or helping in a local situation, or an act of generosity—there are so many ways in our lives, very immediate ways that we can help. And sometimes people are inspired and have the capacity and capability to help on a much larger scale, and so then there's the energy to do that.

For me, the way of dealing with the turmoil and so much of the suffering in the world is precisely the balance of these two qualities of equanimity and compassion, so that we're not adding to the confusion and we're responding in whatever way we can. This is really a beautiful thing.

And this ties very much into the wisdom of the practice, and particularly the wisdom of even beginning understandings of selflessness. Because there's one teaching: when we realize the selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless. I love that, and I really have found it to be true.

We know it in a very mundane, ordinary way—just our usual understanding of a selfless person, how we would use it colloquially. Generally, we see it as a very admirable quality. It's not somebody who's self-centered. They're selfless, and in that selflessness, there's more engagement with other people. Well, if we take selflessness to its ultimate realization—not just as a kind of personality trait, which is a beautiful one, but if we take it to the depths of understanding the truth of non-self—then our life becomes a manifestation of compassionate action.

A phrase that I like, and this might be a good place to end: In Buddhism, we use the term emptiness a lot. And in one of its most profound meanings, it means empty of self. I've come to really understand compassion as being the activity of emptiness. It's not that "I" am being compassionate. The more selfless we are, the more we understand selflessness, compassion is the activity of that state.

Everything you're doing here is precisely cultivating these qualities. It's of course of great benefit to each one of us, but also of benefit to the world, because it provides the frame for understanding how to engage in the world from a selfless place.

May all beings everywhere be at peace.

CHAPTER 76

# Questions and Responses

Joseph Goldstein · 1h08

> *In this engaging question-and-answer session from the three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein shares insights drawn from decades of intensive practice. He begins with an extended exploration of walking meditation, demonstrating how this often-undervalued practice can lead to profound realizations of non-self through techniques like noting the elements (air, earth) and using the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's phrase "there is a body" to dissolve conceptual overlays into pure sensations in space.*
>
> *Joseph introduces a transformative grammatical shift—from active to passive voice—as a practice tool: instead of "I am knowing sensations," simply note "sensations being known." This reframing eliminates the subject-self from experience, revealing the effortless, spontaneous nature of awareness. He addresses the common struggle with "letting go" by suggesting we reframe it as "letting be," trusting that impermanence naturally releases everything without our intervention.*
>
> *The discussion touches on vīriya (energy/effort), exploring its meanings as perseverance and courage, and how to recognize when effort becomes unwholesome striving. Joseph examines the nature of thoughts—"little more than nothing" in their empty, impermanent essence, yet requiring discernment regarding their wholesome or unwholesome content. He concludes with a nuanced explanation of Nibbāna from the early Buddhist perspective as the cessation of the aggregates, and reflects on how aging has made the Buddha's teachings on impermanence viscerally immediate in his own experience.*

We are a month into the three-month course, and Joseph has agreed to come for an evening of questions which the participants have submitted over the last 24 hours. There were way more questions than we could ask in the space of an hour, so a couple of the teachers went through them and pulled out about twelve or so.

**Joseph Goldstein:** I taught the three-month course for so many years—about forty of them. Since I stopped teaching the three-month course, it's always a delight to come back and at least drop into it for these sessions. So it's really a pleasure to be here. And I hope you ask the easy questions.

---

**What do you like about walking meditation?**

This could be the whole hour. First, just to say that very often yogis have a sometimes unacknowledged hierarchy in practice. The sitting is the real deal. Walking—yeah, it helps. And then mindfulness of everything else is a distant third. Sometimes I think it's helpful to just reverse the order in your mind. Make everything else the primary importance, then the walking, then the sitting—just to torch things up a little bit.

The walking, for me, in some way has been the most insightful part of my practice, with the most ramifications and implications for bringing practice into the world. So I'll just highlight a few points so we have a chance to get to some other questions, but the walking is a great practice.

From having done hundreds, thousands of hours of walking meditation over my meditative career, what happens at a certain point is that awareness of the body moving simply becomes the default for moving around. Having done it so often in the more formal way of walking meditation, now and for many years, I've just noticed every time I take a step—no matter whether in my house or going for a walk or even in the middle of a busy city—I take a step, and the mind is just there feeling the step, out of habit, out of the habit of having paid attention to movement and walking for so many years.

I find it's such a powerful way of integrating the practice into our daily lives, which of course is a big challenge for people. On retreat, there are many ups and downs, but there's a lot of support for your practice. We go back into the busyness of our lives, and for most people there's not that same level of support. But there can be this inner support, just from having done something as simple as the walking meditation. It really carries over a lot. That's just one tremendous benefit.

Second, I've discovered—and this happened over years, not just in one moment—each time I'm on retreat, it's "Oh, I just learned something else about the walking." This is a whole dharma talk.

One of the big level shifts in practice, in the course of meditation, is when we go from the conceptual level of experience to the direct experience of what's happening. For example, in walking, even when we're paying attention to the feeling of the movement and the touch, one of the things I've noticed is that very often there can be a very subtle overlay of the concept "foot" and "leg" as I'm taking the step. It's not that the concept is predominant—the predominant thing is the sensations of the movement.

But when I'm really quiet, I can feel that somewhere in the background, that conceptual overlay is there.

So one way I've found of cutting through that subtle level of conceptualization—because we don't actually feel our foot. We don't feel our legs. There's no sensation called "foot," no sensation called "leg." That's an idea, that's an image, which is the overlay on top of the actual sensations we're feeling.

So I had to cut through that conceptual overlay, and this is where it got really interesting to me—and probably will key into some questions that are coming—because it's a way of really getting an experiential taste of non-self, which is one of the more difficult realizations. You know, impermanence is pretty clear to understand. Suffering is certainly easy to understand. But non-self is almost counterintuitive because we all have this strong felt sense of a self.

So, walking. At one point, as I was walking, I started reframing the mental note. Whether or not you are using notes regularly or intermittently or not at all, what I found was this: instead of the more usual note of "lifting" and "moving" and "placing," I started noting the elements. In the walking, the movement became air element. When I touched the ground, it was earth element. So that just became the note: air, earth, air, earth.

Now, what happened prior to that? As long as there was that conceptual overlay of foot or leg, it's an almost inevitable step towards "my foot" and "my leg." Just from that level of concept, we've already bought into the notion of self. When I started doing the elements—air, earth, air, earth—and then I added a little tagline, "just this, just this," I noticed there was no inclination of the mind to say "my air" or "my earth." It really helped the mind drop into that selfless experience of the sensations of the movement. And it was a very vivid experience of selflessness. Oh, just this, just this, just this. It's just air, earth, air element, earth element.

So in the walking, it's actually possible to touch into a very deep aspect of the practice. It's not just some mechanical exercise. And it's more than just developing steadiness and concentration, which of course is important and helpful, but it's possible to go to the real depth of understanding in it.

One last thing, and then we'll get to maybe two questions. I hope I don't get into trouble with the teachers here, but I found that after one is established in the really classical slow form of lifting and moving and really training the mind to be there with it, it's really interesting to experiment and play and explore with different speeds. Sometimes walking really slowly, sometimes faster. Are you aware of the whole body moving? Are you aware just of the sensations in the feet or leg? The encouragement is not to be afraid to just explore. I see it as kind of a laboratory. You make experiments and see what happens.

There's one line in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the foundations of mindfulness, that says: be mindful—and then the equivalent of quotation marks in Pali—be mindful, quote, "there is a body," just to the extent for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness. Bhikkhu Anālayo, in his book on Satipaṭṭhāna, highlighted that phrase, which was very interesting to me. He said "there is a body," and because it was in quotes, it's almost like a mental note—to use it in that way.

So I started using it in walking. As I was doing walking meditation, I would frame it: "Oh, there is a body." And again, something really interesting happened. I was walking, not super slowly, not speeding, but kind of a slow, gentle walk. "There is a body." This led the mind to be aware of the sensations of the whole body moving. It wasn't a narrow focus; it was quite a wide frame. "Oh, there is a body." And what was interesting in doing that, in that experience, was that body disappeared.

"Oh, there is a body," and then walking. And all that was left were sensations in space. That was the actual experience, because "body" itself is a concept. So that phrase—"there is a body"—was just to set the big frame. And then, to be walking with that framework, we have the experience of there *not* being a body. There are only changing sensations in space. So again, it's a way of touching into the impersonal, selfless nature of the whole process.

Do you get a sense that walking can be valuable? There is so much here. This is just touching the surface. But explore, play with it. I think that's where the interest lies, rather than just doing it as some formal exercise.

*Question: When the body dissolves into vibration and space, there still seems to be an observer present. Can you talk about that subtle sense of self that remains, and how to work with it?*

One technique I found really helpful—and this relates to something I haven't mentioned yet. So much of how we experience things is conditioned by language. How we language things very much conditions how we experience them.

Here's one example, one that transformed my practice. Usually we speak in the active voice: subject, verb, object. "I'm knowing the sound." "I'm knowing the movement." There's a subject, a verb, and an object. At one point in my practice—I don't even remember how it arose—I started languaging experience to myself in the passive voice. So instead of "I'm knowing sensations," it became "sensations being known."

What happens to the subject in the passive voice? Self as subject disappears. "Sensations being known"—there's no "I" involved in that languaging of experience. It's just things being known.

This is a bit of a confession: I asked ChatGPT what the subject is in a passive voice construction, because the "I" isn't there. It said the object becomes the subject. "Sounds being known"—the sounds become the subject. That's interesting, almost like a collapse of subject-object separation. It's just things being known.

I use this in walking a lot: "sensations being known." And that frame immediately became completely effortless, because you take the "I"—the someone making an effort—out of the picture. It's just an experiment. If you move your arm with this frame, just be with "sensations being known." Do you have to do anything? They're just being known—spontaneously, effortlessly, precisely, exactly. Not a moment before, not a moment after. They're just being known.

If you carry that frame throughout the day—things just being known—the practice becomes very easeful. That whole struggle-striving mode we often fall into dissolves. "Oh, it's just sensations being known." In that way of experiencing, there is no subject separate, no "I" separate from what's happening. And it becomes very obvious.

If you're at all interested in this, I'd really suggest you play with it a little. Experiment. See if you can settle into that way of experiencing things. There's nothing you have to do except language it that way.

Things being known, sensations being known, sounds being known. Just see how effortlessly it's all happening. If you do this and settle into an easeful rhythm of it, where it becomes obvious—oh yes, this is simple. And it is simple, it's not complicated at all. You don't need to develop samādhi to do it. It's just right there.

If you settle into the flow of it, the rhythm of it, you could then ask a really probing question: Okay, sensations being known—known by what?

This is a way of turning the attention, or highlighting the very nature of awareness, of consciousness. Instead of the sensations being the predominant aspect and the knowing remaining background, it's like reversing it. Known by what? So the knowing becomes foreground, and the sensations are still there but become background. It's a very interesting exploration to really be looking at the very nature of awareness, of knowing.

I don't know if I should tell you what I found or not. I'll leave you to find it out for yourselves. Well, I can't resist.

So I'm doing this—known by what? And then I realized: there's nothing to find. I can't find the knowing. And as one Tibetan teacher said, the not finding is the finding. That's what's to be found—that it can't be found. And yet the knowing is happening.

This is a great mystery. This is the mystery of consciousness. There's nothing there tangible to find, no color, no form. It can't be found, and yet the knowing is happening. It's this union of, we could say, emptiness and knowing. This becomes very apparent in this very simple exercise. That's why when I said this passive voice construction really changed my practice, it really was a major shift to greater ease and even greater interest, because it was touching into some profound questions. What is awareness? What is consciousness?

*In practice, it's easy to hear "let go," but it's often not clear how to actually do that. Could you talk about what letting go really means in practice?*

Yes. This is going to be a really short answer. If you just change one word, it becomes super simple. Letting go—just change it to letting be. Just let it be.

And the letting go will happen by itself, because everything in its nature is arising and passing away. If you're just there with experience, letting it be with awareness, with mindfulness, you don't have to do anything to make things go away. In their very nature they're going to arise and pass away. If we can just settle back and let it be—you could even sing a little verse of that song perhaps.

It's so simple. And I think that's a helpful reframe, because letting go implies that you need to do something, and letting be implies there's nothing you need to do. Just let it be. And then in the letting be, you will be in the flow of changing experience. You're not interfering with it. You're not holding on. And if you're not holding on, there's nothing you have to let go of. Things are arising and passing by themselves.

There's a haiku poem—I forget who wrote it, maybe Bashō or one of the great Japanese haiku poets:

Simply trust.
Don't the leaves fall down just like that?
Simply trust.

Don't the leaves fall down just like that.

I love that poem because it points to how everything is part of nature—just a natural happening. Our own inner process, moment after moment, is just like a leaf falling down. Each moment's experience arises and passes away, arises and passes away, all by itself. We don't have to do anything except let it be and pay attention to how everything is unfolding.

It's pretty simple, actually. But we're very conditioned—that's the problem. A big part of meditation, though it's sometimes talked about and sometimes not, is about relaxation. Particularly in our Western culture, we're so hyped up. The whole culture is like that—all this doing and striving. So we find it hard just to relax and let things be.

But in meditation, if you can remember this, it's really helpful, and the whole system relaxes. This doesn't imply a loss of connection with each moment's experience. We're right there. But there's nothing to do except be mindful, except be aware, seeing the arising and passing of everything.

So it may be simpler than you think. I'm going to get into trouble with this—it's simpler than you think if you let go of letting go. Maybe just let be. Something like that. It's simple. It's really simple. But it's our minds that complicate things, thinking we have to do something, when it's really a question of relaxing. Just relaxing. Let things be.

And in the letting be, all three characteristics become more and more obvious. The impermanence, the unreliability, and the selflessness all present themselves with greater clarity the less we're in there trying to manipulate things.

*Someone asked: Could you talk about the nature of viriya energy and how to recognize when it's wholesome—how to see when it's mixed with striving?*

This is an interesting question. First, let me say I am not by any means a Pali scholar, so keep that in mind. But when I was giving talks on viriya, I did a little study and research, and it turns out there are many different English words that can serve as translations. Usually we translate it as either effort or energy, but it can also mean perseverance. And this is the one I really like: it can also imply courage.

When I read that, something resonated deeply. If we think of the root of that English word, it comes from heart, from *cor*. So we could think of courage as strength of heart, particularly in the face of obstacles.

When we try to understand viriya and how it's applied, it might be helpful to consider this range of meanings and see which one is really appropriate to the moment. Let me give you a few examples of different ways I've experienced it, and also what to do when we lose the balance.

I first started sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita when he came here in 1984. Perhaps some of you have sat with him or heard of him. He was a very demanding teacher—a real effort warrior. Until I met him, I had been practicing with different teachers, none with his kind of warrior-like energy.

For many years before that—I'd been practicing a long time already—my mind had really settled into a very easeful flow. I would just sit and there would be this nice flow of energy that didn't really require much effort. Then U Pandita came along, and in a variety of ways, it was like a kick in the pants. "Okay, you've been enjoying this long enough. Get to work."

And it took many forms—not sleeping very much, using the noting technique, and really making the effort to stay more with the rising and falling.

One of the things I learned from that application of effort or energy was that effort creates energy. Usually, I think, we have the sense that we need energy to make effort. But just think of times when you're tired, you don't have much energy, but you make the effort to go out for a brisk walk or something like that. The effort creates energy, and we feel more energetic, we feel more alive from having made the effort.

When I started practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita, by making the effort—I'm not quite sure how to express this—the energy level in the body, in that flow that we can get into in our meditation, just the flow of sensations, it had been at a certain level, easeful. But having made the effort, all of a sudden that same flow was happening on a completely different level. I came to appreciate how effort creates energy and how it can really impact the practice.

In terms of courage—okay, another basic confession—I'm basically lazy. My tendency is just to go for the easy. Why not? But once I started exploring all this energy and effort, I had a little mantra in my mind, a little instruction to myself: *Choose the difficult*. This went so against my nature. But when there was a choice between an easy way and a challenging way, during that period in my practice, I'd just choose the difficult. Go for it. See what happens.

It even extended beyond meditation. In those years—this has passed now—I was doing some mountain biking with friends who were much better than I was. They'd be going up these hills and I'd have to walk my bike up. They'd be waiting for me at the top reading War and Peace or something. But when I started getting into it, choosing the difficult, I was looking for hard hills to go up. It was difficult and it was challenging, but because I kept doing it, obviously I got stronger and I could do it. That's another sense of an application of right effort or right energy—where we really see how we can strengthen ourselves and maybe come out of our habituated patterns, whatever they may be, at whatever level.

From the other side, there was a time—this relates to the question—when I was doing another retreat with Sayadaw at the Forest Refuge. Because of the way he teaches, very much within the frame of different stages of insight and progressing from this stage to this stage, and unfortunately I knew too much, I knew what all these stages were, and because that was the unspoken message of the retreat, I felt myself striving in an unhealthy, unskillful way. I could feel that.

Then I drew on something I had learned from Tibetan practice. I had done a little Dzogchen practice with some teachers, not a lot, but enough to get the gist of it. In that framework, the message is more "already aware"—just settle back. And just that phrase, "oh, already aware," cut through the striving or wanting something else. Very quickly, it was a very effective way when I saw striving come up—just reminding myself, *already aware*. There's nothing to do except be present. It brought it back into balance, and then I could continue in that retreat, in that style of practice, but without the unhealthy striving.

I think it is important to be watchful of that. The Buddha talked about this—the famous example of tuning the lute in terms of finding the balance of effort. If the strings are too tight, it's not right; too loose, it's not right. There's an exploration, and it really takes paying attention to the quality of your practice. If you're feeling that it's a bit of a struggle, you might look at the quality of the effort you're making—maybe it's too much.

This is not exactly related to the question, but it's coming to mind. Usually when we're struggling, we think it's a problem. We don't like that feeling. What I've found is that the feeling of struggle is a tremendously helpful feedback tool. When we really look to see what struggle means, it means there's something happening that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. So when we're struggling, instead of getting upset about it, we can just take it as feedback. A little investigation: Okay, what's happening here that I'm not accepting? What am I resisting or pushing away or not wanting? Maybe it's some discomfort in the body.

Maybe it's an emotional state. Maybe it's sleepiness. If there's struggle, it means we're not accepting something. So then if we look and discover, *oh, it's this*—oh, it's okay. Let me just be with it. Let it be. And we come out of the struggle and into a place of greater ease.

So again, this is tied into the balance of skillful and unskillful effort or energy. But this is an important dynamic to watch in the mind.

---

*I've heard you say that a thought is little more than nothing. Often that really resonates. Many thoughts do feel just like noise, but sometimes thoughts seem to point to things that genuinely matter. When you say they're little more than nothing, how can we understand that without dismissing what feels meaningful or important?*

This is a really important question because it points to what we could call different levels of understanding or different levels of experience.

To say a thought is little more than nothing is referring to its impermanent, impersonal nature. One way of seeing this clearly—and I think it's really important to do—is when we're having a lot of thoughts, that would be a good time to ask the question: *What is a thought?* Not what is the thought saying, but if there are a lot of thoughts going through the mind and we just turn the attention back and ask, well, what is thought as a phenomenon? We're looking at it because the thoughts are there. What is a thought?

That's when we see it's little more than nothing. We're looking at this thought and it's like a little energy blip. It's there and then it's not there. There's really not much there when we look at it on that level.

But then there's the whole level of the content of thoughts, which is the world we mostly live in. We are almost completely immersed in just the stories and the movies of our minds. We're lost in our stories about ourselves, about other people, about the world. We're lost in the content of the thoughts.

A couple of things about this. First, because we're so immersed in that level of reality, it's really important to see or to discern the content. Is this skillful or unskillful? Wholesome or unwholesome? Does it lead to suffering? Does it lead to happiness? That discernment is really important.

We want to see that this pattern of thoughts—of greed or anger or fear or whatever it may be, jealousy, envy—the content of these thoughts really creates a lot of suffering for ourselves. And so we want to be very mindful when that content arises, and then drop into the understanding. This is a way of freeing ourselves: drop into the level where we see, *oh, well, the thought is basically empty.*

If we can see, for example, an envious thought—when we're caught in it we can feel the suffering of it—and then we recognize, *oh, it's just a thought, it's just this little blip*—then we're not caught by the content. The thought just comes and goes in a really easy manner.

And likewise with wholesome thoughts: when we see them, these should be cultivated. They're the cause of happiness. Thoughts of generosity, of loving-kindness, of compassion. So on the level of content, that discernment is really important. But we also want, at the same time, to understand their empty nature.

This was expressed by different teachers in various traditions in different ways. The Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim, who founded the Providence Zen Center, had this great little phrase: "There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong."

*There's no right and no wrong*—that's pointing to the empty nature. They're just thoughts. They're just empty thoughts.

On that level, it doesn't make any difference. When a thought just comes, it goes. We're not involved. We're not identified. We're not acting on it. But "right is right and wrong is wrong" because on the content level, that difference is important—that's the level from which we act. So we have to combine both of these levels of understanding: to see their empty nature, their being little more than nothing, and at the same time pay attention to the skillfulness or unskillfulness of the content.

I think this understanding of bringing both levels together reflects a certain maturity in our Dharma practice, when we can really hold both levels simultaneously.

The next question asks: Is there any aspect of self or awareness that exists independently of the five aggregates? And if even awareness eventually falls away, how should we understand what remains, if anything, in experience at that point?

This is getting into a really profound question about the experience and the nature of Nibbāna. First I should say that different Buddhist traditions have very different takes on this question. The way Nibbāna is understood in early Buddhism and in Theravāda Buddhism is a very different understanding than Nirvāṇa—which is the Sanskrit term—in the later Buddhist traditions. Even though the same word is used, they mean different things by it. That's helpful to know.

In the West, because all of these teachings from these different traditions are available to us, and many of us have studied or practiced or become familiar with various traditions, it can get really confusing when they're using the same word to describe different things.

So I'll be speaking now from the early Buddhist perspective, which is that there is no awareness apart from the five aggregates. Consciousness is the fifth aggregate. And the experience of Nibbāna is the experience of the cessation of the aggregates.

Let me use a simile for this. I'm sure you've all had the experience at different times—maybe you're sitting in your kitchen just doing whatever you're doing, and then all of a sudden, the refrigerator hum goes off. You're familiar with that? And you can feel a kind of sudden release from a dukkha you didn't even know was there. In the absence of it, there's this sense of relief and release.

So if you think of the five aggregates as the refrigerator hum, and then in the moment of its cessation, the release—okay, here's where it starts to get a little complicated.

While we're alive and practicing and we have that experience, there is a consciousness which takes Nibbāna as its object. It's a consciousness which knows the experience of cessation—knowing the experience of the refrigerator hum going off. This is why when people have that experience, besides the transformative effect it has, the experience can be described in some ways, although very difficult, because there was a knowing of it. But in the "it," there's no awareness itself. This is called supermundane consciousness because it's not usual sense consciousness. It's that special consciousness that is taking the unborn as its object.

It's like the experience of zero. There was a book I came across, and the title alone made me have to get it. The title was *The Nothing That Is: A History of the Number Zero*. Just "the nothing that is." Of course, after the first two paragraphs I couldn't understand anything it said. But I didn't have to, because the title was enough.

You could think of Nibbāna as the nothing that is. That nothing is its own reality. It's not a nothing-nothing. It's a nothing that is.

As you can tell, it's very hard to talk about this.

But while we're alive, we can have that experience. And so we know for ourselves exactly what all these words are referring to. At the death of an arahant—that's called Parinibbāna—there is no supramundane consciousness, because that consciousness is still conditioned, even though it's special in that it takes Nibbāna as its object. At the death of an arahant, a fully enlightened being, there is no awareness in that. What's left is that reality of peace, the nothing that is.

Now that I've totally confused you, I know you can at least begin to get some sense of the subtlety of this. But it's that first experience of the zero that uproots the belief in self. Because we've gone from having a self center at the heart of everything to the experience of the zero center. Once one has had that experience, it's clear that there's no self at the center of things, because we've experienced the zero center. That's why that first glimpse of Nibbāna is what uproots the view or belief in self.

And then, of course, there's still plenty to do, because lots of other defilements remain. There's still aversion, desire, and even conceit. This is kind of interesting also. One might think, well, if the view of self is uprooted, why does conceit remain? In Buddhism, the Pāli word is *māna*. It's any sense of "I am"—comparing oneself with others, or "I was," or "I will be this" over time. *Māna* remains until full enlightenment. It's the last of the defilements to go.

So one might think, if the view of self has been uprooted, why is conceit still there? This gets very interesting for the practice. That pattern of conceit, the "I am-ing" in one way or another, is just such a deeply conditioned pattern—more deeply conditioned than desire. It's deeply rooted, which is why the pattern remains. But after uprooting the view of self, even though conceit still arises, we understand that the conceit itself is selfless. It's just another selfless, impersonal pattern. And the pattern is deeply conditioned, which is why it still shows up.

For myself these days, I love it when I can see conceit arising in my mind, because I'd rather see it than not see it. Some kind of comparing going on—ah, *māna*, I see you! I feel like I'm working on arahantship, because it's one of the last defilements to go. And it's so freeing, because *māna*, when we're not mindful of it, is a real contraction.

I'll tell you a little *māna* story. This was a few years ago. Do you know who Bhikkhu Anālayo is? This really exceptional monk—he lives down at the Study Center. He was on retreat in his little cabin at the same time I was on a self-retreat in my house. So I'm sitting and walking, and then one afternoon I was just frittering away some time. I didn't know what I was doing. And then the thought came: "I bet Anālayo's not frittering away his time."

When I had that thought, I really started getting down on myself. What kind of yogi are you? But then pretty quickly—because I've done a lot of practice, so it didn't take that long, maybe ten minutes of being lost in the self-judgment—at a certain point: "Oh, that's just *māna*." That thought, that comparing mind. As soon as I recognized it as *māna*, and the selfless nature of *māna*, the whole thing just disappeared. All that self-judgment disappeared, because I could see the conceit for what it was instead of not seeing it and being caught in the pattern.

Because this is such a deeply rooted one, and the cause of so much

suffering of one kind or another. When we're in that comparing mode, I just find it really liberating and joyful to keep an eye out for māna, for that pattern of conceit—and not start judging oneself for having it, realizing yes, this is going to be here until full enlightenment. But we can see it. We can see its empty nature and its selfless nature. And so we're really free in it.

I'd recommend keeping an eye out for that. Whenever there's this feeling of "I am" in one way or another—and it takes many forms—it's a really intriguing place to practice and very liberating.

*Question: After a lifetime of practice with impermanence, is there anything about aging and approaching death that you didn't expect?*

In my mother's last years—she lived to about eighty-seven—maybe in the last five years or so of her life, she was in her eighties by then. All the stuff that happens when you're eighty. I'd visit her, and she would be telling me about this or that, and I would be listening, hopefully empathetically, saying, "Oh, I understand." And she looked at me and said, "You have no idea."

Now that I'm in my eighties, I had no idea. Even though I've been teaching this stuff for fifty years—about the body and everything it goes through, all the changes—it is just really interesting. I found it really interesting, the difference in how much more vivid the teachings become as I've aged. It's like, "Oh yes, this is more of what the Buddha's been talking about."

This is not to say that younger people, for various reasons, aren't going through really intense suffering. I'm talking more in a general way about the general aging process. It's just the depth—the depth of experience of the teachings with respect to the body and the nature of the body, and even the mind. Maybe it's losing some of its sharpness, or memory. Things happen. That understanding just becomes so immediate and so vivid.

In some way, the aging process for me has brought the Buddha's teachings even more to life, just experiencing it more viscerally. And that's a bit of a surprise. I didn't realize that's what the trajectory would be. I've had friends who were really great Dharma practitioners, older than myself, and there's this one woman in particular—she just kept saying how interesting it is, this whole process. And I'm finding that myself now. It's just interesting to see more clearly the real nature of what this mind-body is about.

Of course, I think our practice sets us up for having that level of interest rather than just drowning in the difficulties. I'm just so grateful for all the practice I've done, and I see it in other people. It just provides a profound foundation for really investigating and taking interest in this whole process of life and aging and illness and death.

So it's really profound, what you're all doing here. I know at times you probably forget that, with all the ups and downs and challenges, but there's nothing better we can do. And then, of course, we try to share it.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 77

# Questions and Answers with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this intimate Q&A session at the Forest Refuge, founding IMS teacher Joseph Goldstein responds to practitioners' questions with characteristic clarity and depth. He begins by distilling the entire path into a single principle from the suttas: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine." This teaching becomes the foundation for exploring increasingly subtle aspects of practice.*
>
> *Joseph offers three practical approaches for cutting through identification with consciousness—the "last holdout of self." He describes the classical Vipassanā method of seeing the pairwise progression of knowing and object arising together, the Tibetan approach of looking for the mind and finding nothing, and his own innovative use of passive voice language ("sensations being known") to dissolve the sense of a separate knower. He distinguishes genuine equanimity as impartiality from its near enemy of indifference, illustrating how spacious awareness naturally gives rise to mettā. The discussion also clarifies the difference between wise doubt as beginner's mind investigation versus doubt as a hindrance—what the Buddha called the most dangerous obstacle because it masquerades as wisdom.*
>
> *The session addresses the four path attainments (sotāpanna, sakadāgāmī, anāgāmī, arahant), explaining how each stage uproots specific defilements, with stream entry eliminating the view of self while the subtle sense of "I am" (māna) persists until full liberation. Joseph encourages practitioners to find confidence as "faith followers" or "Dhamma followers" on the path, and concludes with unexpected advice: have fun exploring the mind.*

Good to be with everyone, and so grateful to have Joseph Goldstein here. I'm grateful that Caroline Jones had the insight to invite Joseph to join us, and I want to add all of the feelings of gratitude that I saw in the notes people wrote with their questions. Most of you know, but Joseph is really the visionary behind the Forest Refuge and, of course, one of the founding teachers of IMS and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies just down the hill. And one of many of our central important teachers, certainly for me and for probably many others here. So thanks for being here, Joseph.

*Really appreciate that. I hope you ask easy questions.*

I curated them, and I got the hardest ones. Of course, there were like thirty-four questions, and we might get through nine, but I grouped them in categories. So even if it's not your specific question, I'm sure Joseph will cover all of the Dhamma tonight.

So, Joseph, we'll start easy. If you had one sentence to sum up the path, what might that be?

*Don't cling. Maybe I'll add another one from the text, but that's the essence. This comes from one of the suttas: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Whoever understands this, understands the whole of the Dharma. Whoever practices it, practices all of the Dharma." So it's very precise. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. That could really be the foundational understanding of one's practice.*

This might be just adding to that: When sitting, there's an awareness of the body sitting, breathing, feeling, and there is knowing. Is this practice enough, or is there a next step to practice?

*I think the practice is enough, but there is a refinement in how we're attending to each of those objects of experience. Being mindful of the body and not identifying with it is not that difficult over time, at least with particular sensations arising, because we're aware of them coming and going. The same is true of thoughts, even though we may have many of them. Still, it doesn't take too long until we realize that they're just passing phenomena, that they don't really belong to anyone.*

*The tricky part is not identifying with the awareness itself, because even as we're being mindful of all these objects of experience, there's often a very subtle identification creating the sense of someone knowing all the experience. In a way, we could say that's the last holdout of self—this identification with consciousness, identification with awareness.*

*So then it becomes interesting: how can we cut through the identification with knowing? It's quite subtle because knowing itself is a subtle object. It's not tangible like a sensation of the breath or even a mental phenomenon like thought. It's more subtle than that, and so it can be difficult to become mindful of the knowing in a way that we're not identifying with it.*

*Over the years, I found a few different ways to play with or understand ways of cutting through that identification. One is quite classical in the Vipassana tradition, one is more from the Tibetan tradition, and one I made up myself—which is the best.*

*The very classical Vipassana way of cutting through that identification starts earlier on in the course of practice. At a certain stage of insight—and this is more toward the beginning of the path, it's not a super advanced one, but still takes some attention—we see that in every moment, every moment's experience is a pairwise progression of knowing and object, which arise simultaneously. There's a knowing of a sensation arising and passing, knowing of a sound arising and passing, knowing of whatever the object is. As*

*the practice begins to deepen, we really start to experience that everything we call self is simply this process, this pairwise progression: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.*

*The thing is, it's happening so quickly that it gives the illusion of solidity of some kind. There are a few common examples of this. If you have a torch with a flame and you're making a big circle, if you go at a certain speed, it will look like there's a circle of fire, a ring of fire. But actually, there's no ring there—it's a flow of phenomena. Likewise, when we go to the movies and get so involved in the story, emotionally involved, what's really happening? Nothing we think is happening is really happening.*

It's just pixels of light on the screen. But because it's happening so quickly, we're not seeing the discontinuity. And so it appears real and solid.

Well, that's how the whole notion of self comes about. This pairwise progression of knowing an object is happening so quickly—it's like a movie. We get lost in the story because we're not seeing the arising and passing moment after moment.

So this is really what our practice is about: refining our perception of change with the insight that in every moment there are these two aspects, inseparable but distinct. That's an important point. You can't separate the knowing from the object, but they're two distinct processes arising and passing together.

At a certain stage of insight, we begin to see this rapidity of change really clearly, and that weakens the identification with consciousness. We see that the consciousness aspect of this pair—the knowing of an object—is arising and passing in each moment. There's nothing there, nothing which lasts long enough to be self. And certainly not each moment of consciousness. So that's one way of cutting through this very subtle identification.

There's another approach that may be even more accessible. In some Tibetan traditions, and also in some Zen, often the instruction is to look for the mind—to try and look, can we find the mind? For example, you're sitting and maybe you're hearing sound. Sometimes when I'm sitting, the question will come into my mind: Can I find what's knowing the sound? It's clear that the sound is being known, but can I find what's knowing it? In some of the Tibetan traditions, the teaching is that when you look for the mind, there's nothing to find. And the not finding is the finding. It's to see that there's nothing to find. And when there's nothing to find, there's nothing to identify with. So that's another way of freeing oneself from identification with awareness, with consciousness.

Building on this—and this is my own little addition to the canon—many of you probably have heard me speak about how so much of what we're experiencing is determined by the language we use. Language has a profound impact on how we experience the unfolding.

Usually in our ordinary speech, we use the active voice, that grammatical function. Active voice means there's a subject, a verb, an object. "I'm knowing a sound," or "I'm going here," or "I'm going to get that." Subject, verb, object.

At some point in my practice—and I don't know how it arose—I just started using the passive voice in describing the experience to myself. It became very clear in the walking meditation. At first it would be, "Oh, I'm knowing the sensations." But then in the passive voice it became "sensations being known." That's the passive voice construction. Sensations being known, a sound being known, a thought being known.

Even though writing coaches will tell writers not to use the passive voice, from a meditative point of view, I found it tremendously effective. When we use the passive voice—"sensations being known"—there's no self as subject there. It's just things being known, and there's no "I" as the subject. So just through the language we're using to describe our experience to ourselves, it puts us right into that frame of things being known.

Some remarkable things happen from that. First, things are known completely effortlessly. If you move your arm with this frame in mind—sensations being known, sensations of the movement—why don't you try it? It's completely simple. You can move at any speed, being known. It's just being known. Do you have to do anything for it to be known? It's happening all by itself.

So the practice really became hugely less effortful. In this framework, when we shift from the "I" looking for something to the passive voice of allowing things simply to be known as they will be, things get very fluid and easy.

One meditative exercise might be to play with this for a short time at first—maybe five minutes or ten minutes—either in sitting or walking or going about. Frame that five minutes in terms of what's being known moment after moment. We just kind of settle back, receiving what's being known, not doing anything. It's all happening by itself. This gives a real taste of selflessness, of cutting through the identification with the knowing, because there's no knower there.

Is this making sense? If it is, I just encourage you to play. Experiment with it, because both for myself and now, having taught this for many years, people have found it really helpful. And it's so simple—completely simple—so don't complicate it. It's just moment after moment, things being known. Be attentive in that process.

Many dharma teachings emphasize equanimity and non-reactivity. How do we differentiate genuine equanimity from nervous system shutdown or dissociation?

First, as many of you are probably aware, each of the Brahma Viharas has a near enemy—something that looks like it but is not it. The near enemy of loving-kindness is attachment. We think when we're attached to somebody it means we love them, but they're really two very different states. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. The near enemy of mudita, empathetic joy, is exuberance. And the near enemy of equanimity is indifference.

So it's really important that we examine the quality of mind we may be calling equanimity, to see if it has the flavor of indifference or the flavor of impartiality. I like the word impartial to describe equanimity because it's really the space of mind that holds everything equally. It's just seeing things for what they are. Now, this impartiality does not imply withdrawal. It doesn't imply indifference. It's simply openness—openness to what's actually there and seeing it fully. From that place of impartiality, we then have a better chance of discerning an appropriate response to whatever the situation is.

Here is where there's an important balance between equanimity and compassion. Equanimity gives us a full understanding of whatever the situation is. We're seeing it clearly, without bias, without partiality. Based on that clear seeing, we can then discern what the compassionate response to this situation might be. Equanimity settles us back into openness, and compassion motivates engagement with the world. The two really balance one another and, for me, create a beautiful way of navigating the complexities of our lives. Can we have equanimity about what's happening and also have an open heart that's responsive in a wise way?

There are many examples of this, but I'll give one that illustrates non-equanimity, equanimity, and then how metta and compassion arose from it. This goes back many years. I was having a conversation with another teacher and friend—someone I've known for a long time—but there was a conflict going on about something. Of course, now I don't even remember what it was, but I remember the interaction. We were in my living room, he was sitting in one chair, I was sitting in another, and we were going back and forth. It was somewhat charged because naturally we each thought we were right, and we were getting into this kind of conflict.

Then at a certain point—and this happened quite spontaneously—I went from the sense of me sitting here and that person sitting there, being involved in this conflict, to something else entirely. My mind quite spontaneously shifted from that perspective. It became this space which held us both. Even now, as we're sitting together in this room, we could think of ourselves as just "I'm here, you're all there," each in your own seat. But just for a moment, see if you can become aware of the space that's holding us all.

What that shift did was take me out of identification with this mind-body process to the place of just open awareness, spacious awareness—the space that was holding us both. And what was so striking was that the quality in that space, the quality holding us both, was metta. It wasn't something I was thinking about—"How do I create metta in this situation?"

It just happened. So I saw that becoming the space was like equanimity—instead of being caught in the conflict, the space holds us both. Getting out of the way, and the manifestation of that was connection. It's quite amazing that we can go from that self-identification to equanimity to connection.

So there are a few possibilities here. Do you see a distinction between healthy doubt, which science-backed research shows supports more humility and thorough decision-making, and doubt as it's understood in the Dharma as a hindrance?

Yes, there's a huge difference. And again, I think it's in some Zen teachings where they talk about the great doubt, which is really about the doubt of investigation. You mentioned in the question humility. It is the humility of realizing, at least for most of us, that we're not fully enlightened yet. And if you are, please let me know afterwards.

But for those of us who are not yet fully enlightened, to have that quality of investigation, of exploring—well, what is this? I know that you're familiar with the book by Suzuki Roshi, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. It's a great book with many great teachings. He said, "In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." And so beginner's mind became kind of a watchword after that book. But that's the quality of a wise doubt, which really implies that interest in exploring and investigating rather than relying on whatever preconceptions we may have about the nature of experience.

For me, it's one of the things I love about going on retreat each year. Because, as you well know, you've just been here for almost a month, many of you. When we're practicing, especially on retreat, we're always at the forward edge of our practice, wherever

that may be. We're exploring, and sometimes it's smooth sailing, and sometimes there are a lot of hindrances. But we're right where we're supposed to be in exploring what's arising and what comes next.

What's interesting for people who may practice like that for a while and then don't practice, don't keep up that kind of exploration—my experience and observation has been that we begin to live in the memory of our experience of the practice, rather than staying at the forward edge of the exploration. So this wise doubt is that beginner's mind. And our practice in our life, even though you may not always remember this, is always interesting. If we're really at the forward edge of what we need to understand and explore and accept and become mindful of, it's endlessly interesting. And that, to me, is the beauty of retreats like this, because it keeps us right at that forward edge.

So that's wise doubt—beginner's mind, openness.

Doubt as a hindrance is just perplexity. The example given is being at a crossroads and being completely indecisive about which way to go. Should I go this way? Should I go that way? And we're caught. We're trapped in the doubt.

I'll give you an example—but there are many examples of how we can get caught in doubt like that. This goes back years to one three-month retreat at the retreat center. There was one yogi who was doing Vipassana and then was having some kind of struggle. So he said, "I think I'd like to do metta." Okay, so I gave him the instructions for the metta practice, thinking maybe that would help settle things. He did the metta for a little while, and then he came up against some difficulty—oh, maybe I should be doing Vipassana. So, okay, go back to Vipassana and just do that. A week later, two weeks later—no, no, this is not working. I think I'm going to do metta. This went on for almost three months. His mind just could not settle into doing one thing and seeing where it leads. It was this perplexity, this going back and forth, this indecision. So that is clearly a hindrance in practice.

And of course, there are also all the forms of self-doubt: I can't do this, it's too hard.

Be watchful for that. It's just a tape in the mind.

What's interesting about this kind of doubt that's a hindrance—the Buddha referred to it as the most dangerous of the hindrances. So it's something we really want to keep an eye out for. Because with all the others, we're in the ballpark of the present moment experience. We may be viewing it through the filter of desire or aversion or sleepiness, but at least we're in the ballpark. With doubt, we're not even in the ballpark anymore. Our minds are just going back and forth, completely disconnected from what is actually happening in the moment.

So this quality of doubt as a hindrance, this skeptical doubt—we really have to pay attention when that may be arising in the mind and name it clearly, name it carefully. Because if you can be mindful that it is doubt and name it, it loses its power. We're not then caught in it or lost in it. "Oh, this is doubt." You might even use a phrase from the suttas: "Mara, I see you." Mara is trying to get me with doubt. I see you.

But it's very seductive, because doubt comes masquerading as wisdom. And that's why it's so dangerous. These doubts come in a very wise-sounding voice, and so we start believing it. So it's worth exploring a little bit the different ways doubt may arise in each of your minds. Probably there are different variations of that indecision or perplexity or self-assessment—or assessment of others, especially the teachers. What do they know? Pay attention to whatever form it may arise, if it does, with the intention to really keep an eye out for it. Because if we can be aware of it, then it's not a problem. When we're not aware of it, it really can derail our practice. So it's a really important one to take care with.

A question came: Can you speak about the impersonal nature of all things, along with a sense of purpose? A sense of purpose seems personal.

Sense of purpose often does seem personal—until we see the impersonality of it. One frame for understanding the different ways each of those manifests, and it doesn't align perfectly but mostly, is the difference between expectation and aspiration.

When there's expectation in our practice, that is always personal. We have this expectation, which is always a setup for suffering, because we're not in control of how things unfold. Things unfold according to their own laws.

One common example I found in my own practice: if I'm on retreat and have a really good sitting, then at the end of the sitting the thought comes, "I'll get up and do some walking and then I'll just pick up where I left off." So often—good sitting, concentrated, go for a walk, come back, and for whatever reason the mind is doing something else. To the degree that I was holding to that expectation that it should be a certain way, it's a setup for frustration and hinders our ability to be just with what's happening. So it's all very "selfing" with expectation.

With aspiration, that's understanding—we could maybe express it as this understanding of why we're practicing or what we're practicing for: for greater awareness, for greater compassion, for greater wisdom.

I'm going to back up a minute. Sometimes in—I don't know, is the phrase "new age" still used? There was a whole time it was just called "new age stuff." I don't know if that's still being used. Anyway, one of the new-agey things was "no goals." Goals—don't have goals, just be in the moment. The Buddha definitely laid out a goal. The Eightfold Path leads someplace. It's not just meandering around, not going anyplace.

The Eightfold Path is leading, we could say, to awakening, to enlightenment. So we can have that aspiration, which sets the direction for our practice. We might say that is a purpose—a sense of purpose. We can hold that sense of purpose as an aspiration, but we're seeing it not so much in terms of an egoful striving, but rather as a realization of our values and what leads to the accomplishment of our values. It's a very different feeling and mind state.

I think it's very possible to have that sense of purpose, a deep sense of purpose, and I think most Dharma practitioners have this. It's why you're here. This would not be most people's idea of having fun. It is fun—I think it's tremendous fun—but from the outside, it doesn't look that way. Because there is a sense of purpose and a sense of direction. Can we have some sense of why we're doing it, but with an appreciation that it's a natural unfolding? It's not an egoful striving. And if it is, then that egoful striving should be noticed as wanting or desire, so we don't confuse the aspiration with the expectation.

Someone asked: "Is your faith strong in the four path attainments as genuine markers on the path? Please expand."

Yes, my faith is strong. One of the characteristics of this tradition—and it's not true of all Buddhist traditions, as different Buddhist traditions frame the process of awakening in different ways—but in this tradition of the Buddhist teachings, based on the Pali Canon and the early discourses, there are four stages of enlightenment: stream entry, once-return, non-return, and arahant. The function of each of those moments of realization is the uprooting of certain defilements in accordance with that particular stage.

For example, at that first stage of stream entry, what is uprooted, first and foremost, is the view or belief in self, because the mind has opened to a reality beyond everything and anything we could take to be self. We could think of it this way: if we think of our normal lives as revolving around a self-center, that sense of "I"—basically this is how we go through our lives. This is the conventional understanding, and it's the place from which most people are living. But then imagine going from self-center to zero-center, to realize that there's no self at the center of things. It's the zero-center.

If you think of nibbāna as being the experience of zero, zero is a really interesting number, because it's not a thing in itself, and yet it has the most powerful function in the whole number system. I was once reading a book called *The Nothing That Is*. I just saw that title and it totally intrigued me—*The Nothing That Is*. So I bought the book and started reading. It was a history of the number zero. The first few lines really captured my interest. It said—and I think it's mostly accurate, though I may be paraphrasing a little—"When you look at zero, you see nothing. When you look through it, you see the world."

Somehow that just resonated with the experience of nibbāna, which is zero. There's nothing there that could be claimed as "I" or "mine." It's zero. And yet, it's the nothing that is. It is its own reality. From that experience of the zero-center, the whole world is being seen without reference to an "I," without reference to a self. It's just, as one of my teachers said—and this may be in the text—everything is just empty phenomena rolling on. This whole mind-body process is empty of self. It's just phenomena arising and passing away.

And so that first experience of zero is what uproots the belief in self. It's not to say that the deeply conditioned patterns of selfing are all eliminated at that time. That's why, for example, one of the very last defilements to be uprooted—not until we're fully enlightened—is what's called *mana* in Pali, usually translated as "conceit," but it really means any sense of "I am."

So an interesting reflection arises: if the view of self has been uprooted at the first stage, why is this conceit or *mana* not uprooted until the final stage of liberation? It's because that pattern in the mind—"I am"—is so deeply conditioned. It really has to do with comparing oneself with others, any comparison whatsoever. Better than, worse than, equal to—that's *mana*. Or a view over time: "I was this in the past, I'm this now, I'll be this in the future." I am. It's "I am-ing."

So that pattern in the mind is very deeply conditioned. However, because the view or belief in self has been genuinely uprooted, the pattern of "I am-ing" is seen and understood itself as being selfless. We recognize, "Yes, it's just a pattern that's still there and will be there for quite a while," but it has lost the essence of its power, even though we get caught in it a lot. This is just another selfless phenomenon—the pattern of "I am."

For me, I love it when I see *mana* in my mind. When I can see it arising—and it does, and it will until we're fully enlightened, it's going to be there so many times in so many ways—every time I see it, I'm really delighted. I would rather see it than not see it. And when I do see it, I feel like I'm working on arahantship, because that's one of the last defilements to go. There's a lot of energy and delight in the fact of seeing it, whereas it

took a while to get over the judgment of myself: "Oh, there's conceit again, there's *mana* again." We can really change our attitude if we have interest in seeing it and understanding it.

These realizations, certainly at the first stages, are not super far-off. Many yogis have experienced the first stage, so there is confirmation at that time. But even before then, sometimes people can get caught up in an unhealthy striving for these realizations, and the effort gets way out of balance. There's grasping at something in an unhealthy way.

So the Buddha had two other teachings which I think are really important to help balance that. If the striving for attainment is strong and really creating an imbalance in the mind—which is not uncommon—the Buddha talked about two levels of experience before stream entry, which he called the faith follower and the Dhamma follower.

The faith follower is someone who, for whatever reason, has this deep, deep faith in the teachings of the Buddha. They're not questioning, they don't have doubt about it—that faith factor is very strong. The Dhamma follower is the yogi who has explored the teachings in some depth, who really has an understanding of impermanence and *dukkha* and at least a conceptual understanding of non-self. There's been real investigation and the development of wisdom.

The Buddha put people in these two categories, which occur before stream entry, and called them noble individuals who are assured, who are on the path leading to enlightenment. I find that really reassuring for a lot of people. Those who are truly committed to the practice and have devoted themselves, who are either faith followers or Dhamma followers—that's a great foundation to rest your practice on. You have faith, you have assurance: "Yes, I'm on this path, this is where it's going." And so you can let go of that unhealthy striving, because you understand this will just lead onward to all the different stages of realization.

I think many of the experienced yogis who come here and to other places are already faith followers and Dhamma followers. You can really have confidence in that, because it's right out of the texts.

Well, this is, of course, a huge issue in our culture, in our society, and it's something IMS has been working on very consciously for quite a long time now. I think we really committed ourselves to greater diversity on all levels of the organization all the way back in 2008, when it first became a really strong intention.

As those of you who have been involved in this kind of work know, especially in the beginning years, it was really challenging. It's very complex, and there were a lot of cross currents and lots of stuff going on. But we were very clear in our intention.

Over the years, at first we really expanded the BIPOC representation on the board of directors of IMS, and that made a huge difference. For a long time, maybe we had one or two BIPOC folk on the board, but that was not enough to really effect change throughout the whole organization. When we had many on the board, maybe sometimes as many as half, that's when the whole issue really was energized.

Then some years ago, we did a teacher training for BIPOC folk because we realized it's not only the board of directors—it's who's sitting up front, representing the diversity of people who come. So there is very much a lot of intentionality behind that. And of course, there's always more that can be done, and a lot of things get overlooked. But the intention is there to keep developing. It's really a strong value of IMS.

For me personally, it was an amazing journey, the exploration of all of this. It first started even before the change began at IMS. I was part of a retreat for social activists that was actually set up by Ram Dass and some others. It wasn't at IMS; it was at some other place. And for some reason, it was the first time—as I was hearing the stories of people, it's quite embarrassing to say this—that was really the first time I became really conscious that this is a problem in this country. When I look back, how could I not have known that all along? But it really opened up a whole new world for me. And that's what motivated a lot of the sense that we have to do something.

There's always more. And so I think just as an institution, if there are any insights or things where you see it's not quite working as well as it might be, it would be worth letting us know because the intention is certainly there.

One final question: What is an aspect of meditation or Buddhist practice that is often overlooked but you think would be of great benefit to most people?

I'm going to say something that you will probably never find in the suttas: Have fun.

And it doesn't mean take things lightly, but it means just having that beginner's mind, just taking that interest and exploring and investigating. I mean, what could really be more fun than exploring one's own mind? Because our whole lives are a manifestation of our minds. Everything we do and everything we feel and how we relate to things—it's all coming out of our minds. So really, the practice is exploring our life. And the origin of it all is the nature of the mind and everything that's going on in it.

So to just have that quality of interest rather than, as I say, an unhealthy striving or expectation—just that interest in exploration of the whole range. And sometimes it's easeful and sometimes it's hugely difficult. But if we have the right attitude, it's always interesting. What's happening now? How am I getting caught? How can the mind be free?

I don't recall in the suttas the Buddha saying, "Have fun." Although interest—interest is really one definition or one source of pīti, or rapture. Pīti is often described as intense interest. And it brings a lot of joy, regardless of what it is that's happening.

So, have fun.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice, may my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue, my mother, my father, and my relatives, the sun and the moon, and all virtuous leaders of the world—may the highest gods and evil forces, celestial beings, guardian spirits of the earth, and the Lord of death, may those who are friendly, indifferent, or hostile, may all beings receive the blessings of my life. May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the deathless.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice and through this act of sharing, may all desires and attachments quickly cease, and all harmful states of mind.

Until I realize Nibbana, in every kind of birth may I have an upright mind with mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigor. May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.

The Buddha is my excellent refuge. Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma. The solitary Buddha is my noble guide. The Sangha is my supreme support. Through the supreme power of all these, may darkness and illusion be dispelled.

*Thank you all. Have fun.*

CHAPTER 78

# Opening Session

Joseph Goldstein · 1h24

> *This opening session of "Liberation: A Dialogue Across Buddhist Traditions" brings together five distinguished teachers—Joseph Goldstein, John Dunne, Anne Klein, Guo Gu, and Dhammadīpa—at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Each teacher shares their personal journey into the Dhamma, from Joseph's first meditation in Thailand at age 21, to Anne Klein's inexplicable draw to Tibet, to Guo Gu's training with Master Sheng Yen from age eleven.*
>
> *The session establishes the central questions that will guide the retreat: Can different Buddhist traditions, despite their varied metaphysical frameworks, lead to the same liberation? How do we understand teachings that appear to contradict one another? Joseph recalls his formative insight that "metaphysics as skillful means for non-clinging" helped him reconcile Theravāda and Dzogchen perspectives, while acknowledging his understanding has continued to evolve.*
>
> *The gathering begins traditionally with the taking of the Three Refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) and the Five Precepts in Pāli, referencing Majjhima Nikāya 43's teaching that right view ripens into liberation through sīla (ethics), learning and discussion, samatha, and vipassanā. Anne Klein leads a guided meditation focusing on bodily awareness, the central channel, and heart-center practice, closing with the Tibetan seed syllable "AH" as a dedication of merit. This session sets the stage for a weekend of genuine inquiry across lineages.*

Welcome, everyone. It's good to see you.

My name is William Edelglass. I'm Director of Studies here at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. I'd like to welcome everybody who's here in Barre and everybody who's on Zoom.

I'd also like to acknowledge that we are on land that was traditionally stewarded by the Nipmuc people, many of whom still live in this area. In fact, a couple of years ago, we had a Nipmuc language concert in this Dharma Hall. I'd also like to acknowledge all the beech and birch trees and hemlock, the owls that we hear at night, the chipmunks, and all the other living beings who accompany us.

If you look at our website, BuddhistInquiry.org, you'll see that at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, we are interested in exploring and inquiring into Buddhist traditions to help inform our practice. These next few days will be exploratory, inquiring. They began as a small conversation with Joseph and John and myself, and we wanted to in-

vite others into this conversation. We wanted to invite some other teachers who were deeply rooted in the lineage, and then we wanted to invite some friends who could be here to participate in it.

We are very glad you're here. We've been thinking about this gathering for a couple of years, and you have a very warm welcome.

---

Now we will go to Dhammadipa.

A warm welcome to everyone. One of my dhamma names is Dhammadipa.

Just to give a tiny bit of background for this chanting: in Majjhima Nikaya 43, the middle-length discourses, there is a conversation between Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Mahakotthita with a lot of detailed information. One question that gets posed to Venerable Sariputta is: when there is right view, how does that ripen into freedom of heart and freedom by wisdom? It's said that there are five factors by which that ripens. The first of those is ethics, then learning and discussion, and then samatha and vipassana—calming or tranquility and insight. All of those conditions can come together this weekend.

We're going to start right at the beginning with ethics. Many people know these versions of the chants. These are in the traditional language of early Buddhism, Pali. If they're not familiar, feel free to just stumble over them or let it wash over you. Rather than do call and response, we'll just chant all together.

We'll begin with the homage to the Buddha, then pause for a moment as I begin the chant for the refuges—taking refuge in the Triple Gem: Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Then the five precepts. This is the early Buddhist or Theravada form of the five precepts for lay people. These are completely optional. Please only take precepts that you're actually going to follow, and you can follow them just for this period of time, or for a lifetime, or beyond.

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhassa*
*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhassa*
*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhassa*

*Buddham Saranam Gacchami*
*Dhammam Saranam Gacchami*
*Sangham Saranam Gacchami*
*Dutiyampi Buddham Saranam Gacchami*

*Dutiyampi Dhammam Saranam Gacchami*
*Dutiyampi Sangham Saranam Gacchami*
*Tatiyampi Buddham Saranam Gacchami*
*Tatiyampi Dhammam Saranam Gacchami*
*Tatiyampi Sangham Saranam Gacchami*
*Tisarana Gamanam Nitthitam*

For the five precepts, let's chant the Pali all together, and then you will also recite the English so that you know what you're committing to.

*Panatipata Veramani Sikkapadam Samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from taking life.

*Adinnadana Veramani Sikkapadam Samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from taking what is not given.

*Abrahmacariya Veramani Sikkapadam Samadiyami*

This one requires a note: what you have here is sometimes referred to as the monastic version, Brahmacariya Veramani, which means refraining from sexual activity. The lay version, Kamesu Micchacara, means refraining from sexual misconduct.

*Musavada Veramani Sikkapadam Samadiyami*

I undertake the precept to refrain from false speech.

And then this last line affirms that understanding I was mentioning earlier: "May this virtue of mind help bring about the knowledge of the path and its fruit."

So we chant it in Pali, usually three times:

*Idam me silam magaphala ñanassa paccayo hotu*

Thank you very much, Dhammadipa.

It's a pleasure to be here with you all tonight, and with these very distinguished teachers and practitioners of the Dharma. My name is John Dunne, and as William mentioned, I may have something to do with the fact that we're all here tonight. Hopefully that's good karma—although if a Dharma brawl breaks out over the weekend, it may not turn out to be so good.

That reminds me, actually: as William said, we were talking about this article, this essay that you have all received, that Joseph wrote. That was very much spurred by some other conversations he's been having, but also, of course, by his original work *One Dharma*, published more than twenty years ago. I remember that book begins with a certain kind of Dharma conversation. Some of you may remember it recounts an encounter between a Tibetan master and a Korean Zen master. At a certain point, the Zen master wants to engage in Dharma combat. So he picks up an orange from the bowl of fruit in front of him, holds it up to the Tibetan Lama, and says, "What is this?" The Tibetan Lama has a translator. He gets the translation—"What is this?"—and he says, "What? Don't they have oranges in your country?"

So let's hope we'll get to a higher level of coherence than that particular conversation reached this weekend.

But in some ways, that does speak to the very fact that you could have that kind of encounter at all. When the Dharma first reached Tibet, there was very little access to practitioners from the Far East—from Korea, some interaction with practitioners from China, but not at all from Japan. There was actually very little interaction between Tibet and Southeast Asia, where the Theravada tradition was flourishing. Likewise, those other traditions had some interactions here and there, but what we have in this modern period, especially in the United States—because we are indeed a kind of melting pot—are various transportation technologies, communications technologies, and just the way our lives are. This has led to a situation in which we really encounter the Dharma in many different forms very easily, even on a daily basis if we wish. Many of us have practiced in more than one tradition, or have at least dabbled in more than one style of practice.

This has raised many questions, especially the kinds of questions that Joseph has pointed to—questions perhaps that are really pointing to the quintessence of what the Dharma is about: liberation. How do we find continuities across traditions? Are there points that we all agree on? Are there important ways in which we disagree? That's part of what we'll be exploring this weekend with these distinguished teachers.

I'll be serving as your moderator, and I'll also contribute a little bit here and there. I'll begin by introducing myself, since I already have the mic, and then I'm going to ask each of our teachers to introduce themselves, and finally Joseph at the end. As we introduce ourselves, we'll also say maybe a little preview of what we might say over the course of the weekend. We've had an interesting conversation already, and I'm really interested to see where all of this goes.

So I've been practicing the Dharma for about forty-five years. I was reflecting on that number just recently—it's been quite a long time. I started not very far from here, actually, at Amherst, when I left the United States Air Force Academy. I was a fallen astronaut, so to speak. I ended up at Amherst College, where a dorm mate very kindly introduced me to Vipassana meditation because I was definitely falling apart. Then I took a class with Robert Thurman and also met my first Tibetan teacher, Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche. That really got me rolling, and it hasn't stopped since.

I practiced especially in the Tibetan tradition, first in the Gelugpa tradition, which is more scholastic. That philosophical perspective has been very important to me throughout my life. But then I also encountered a tradition through the lineage of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, and especially his oldest son, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, but also Mingyur Rinpoche, the younger brother, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche. That is a non-dual style of practice that combines two non-dual lineages in Tibet, known as Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

I also have a kind of academic lineage, if you like. I'm a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I work with scientists who study the effects of meditation practices.

And probably some of that will come up in what I have to say this weekend.

But I'm especially interested in a particular quote that Joseph uses in his essay, a really important quote in the tradition that I'm involved in. It's said to have been spoken by the great Indian Mahasiddha Tilopa to his student Naropa. And the quote says—in Tibetan it says, *Nangwe miching shembe ching, shemba chodom Naropa*—"My child, you are not bound by appearances. You're bound by your clinging. Cut through your clinging, O Naropa."

And so that's what I'm going to try to unpack, especially in relationship to the idea of non-duality. So we'll see where that goes. I might do something entirely different, actually, when the time comes. But that's where I'm headed right now.

And now I'm going to turn it over to Anne and ask Anne Klein to introduce herself.

---

Thank you. And good evening, everyone. It's wonderful to be here with our distinguished cohort and with all of you.

Where does it all begin for any of us? Where did it begin for you, meeting the Dharma in this country, in this century?

So one early moment for me. When I was in high school and also in college—nothing. Absolutely nothing on Asia, Buddhism. A little bit starting about Zen. Suzuki Roshi was starting San Francisco Zen Center at that time, so just a little bit on the edge of the culture. I didn't get any education in that. But what I did read was interesting in some unfathomable way. Alan Watts. There wasn't much to read at that time.

My junior year in college, I just got a hit that I really had to go to India. And I was going to do it, even though there was no real reason whatsoever that I could present. So I went to graduate school in order to develop a reason that would be meaningful to my parents. And lo and behold, there was a Buddhist studies program at the University of Wisconsin, where John now is. And I thought, fantastic—whoever heard of a Buddhist studies program? I like it. I like philosophy. I'll go.

That year, Jeffrey Hopkins, who some of you may know from his many years way back now translating for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, was a graduate student. He had invited Kensur Ngawang Lekden, who was the last abbot of traditional Tibet, of one of the great tantric colleges of Lhasa. He was seventy years old at the time. And he was a person I was told that if you met him in traditional Tibet, you would throw yourself on the ground if you saw him a hundred yards away. You would certainly not look in his eyes.

And he was living with us in this old farmhouse outside Madison—graduate students and Jeffrey. We wanted to be together so that we could see what it was like to live with a Tibetan teacher. We didn't speak Tibetan except for Jeffrey.

And he taught. He taught the seven cause-and-effect precepts, *Kuntimengak Dune*, a seven-fold method dating back to Chandrakirti for cultivating compassion. I'd never heard anything remotely like that. Jeffrey started talking about dependent arising. Whoa—this makes sense. I just had this feeling: nothing I've ever heard has made as much sense as this. This is what I have to focus on. May I have time in my life.

So I begged Kensur, please tell me what to study when I go to India. Because my hit to go to India was very open. I had no idea what to do in India.

And I realized that I would study with the dependant. So I did. I got an MA from Wisconsin and went to India, where I studied at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. I was taught by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, who was handpicked by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He taught Shantideva, so I was being introduced to classic Mahayana.

At the same time, my now husband had come to India to do a PhD in Tibetan, but he ended up taking innumerable Goenka courses—Satyanarayan Goenka's Vipassana courses. So I also went to some of those courses. I really valued them and practiced

them for many years. But I also knew that my heart was with Tibet, inexplicably, because honestly, the experiences I had in those two or three ten-day courses were way more dramatic and impactful than anything that happened to me in the Tibetan tradition for decades. Nonetheless, that was my devotion.

When I went back to the States—also academic heritage—Jeffrey started a Tibetan studies program at the University of Virginia, so I went there for my PhD. We had an incredible situation. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was handpicking the best geshes of the era, those who had won debates and really accomplished their status, who had triumphed over everyone in debate. We studied with them, which is sort of like asking Einstein to teach you a multiplication table, but that's what happened. We became very close with those teachers. They stayed sometimes for a year or more.

At that time, Jeffrey also invited Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche, who himself had spent time in Gelugpa monasteries in Tibet—not exactly of his own desire. He was actually a mantrika, a ngakpa. He introduced us to the foundation of what is now known as *Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It wasn't in English yet. He taught it to a class of about a hundred people, the largest class ever at UVA, I think in 1970 or 1971. It goes way back. He basically taught the foundational practices for Dzogchen. He was just a lovely person.

The night before he left, he read from his own autobiography some of what his experiences in retreat had been like. I'd never heard anything like that. He saw light in the dark. What could that possibly mean? So then and there, we were like, we have to do this. And he said, well, if you want to do it, do these foundational practices. Learn Tibetan, by the way—I'm not talking about things like this through a translator. So that was a big start for me, also with the Nyingma tradition.

Like John, for perhaps the first twenty years or so, most of my so-called scholarly work was really in the Gelugpa tradition—a couple of books—and I value it still tremendously in my mind. I could understand some things that opened cracks that I just didn't think I could if somebody didn't really lay it out in a very comprehensive way. I valued that. But at the same time, I was involved with Nyingma, and once I finished these practices, I continued for the rest of his life until 2009 to study with Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche.

Then in 1996, I was really moved to create a pilgrimage that would visit the places of the Longchen Nyingtik. The Longchen Nyingtik is one of the most famous and widespread, I'm told, of the Dzogchen lineages in Tibet. There are many extraordinary Dzogchen lineages in Tibet. Longchen Nyingtik means "heart essence of the vast expanse"—that's what it means in English. I'll probably end up saying something about that.

So in 1996, on this pilgrimage to visit places sacred to this tradition, I met a lama. That lama turned out to be an incarnation of Jigme Lingpa, who was the origin, the revealer of this tradition. It was just amazing. He was the reincarnation of several other really famous people too. And here we were meeting him. Would he teach us? Yes, he would. And he taught us one by one. He said, "Because everybody's different, how could I say the same thing to all of you?"

We met this great master through pure serendipity. And that was a very important connection for me—overwhelming, actually. So that was that, and then I became his student. To this day, he is a great tertön, revealer of texts, and we receive them when we're fortunate. Part of what we do—we being his students in the West and our center at Dawn Mountain—is teach them. They are beautiful entrees to Dzogchen practice.

So I have quite a conversation myself among these various traditions, as do you. I was very moved, as I said earlier, by Joseph saying that the reason he wrote what he wrote—that we've all read—was that these teachers, they're really great teachers, but they say kind of different things. What are we to make of that? There's confusion somewhere in the system, or there's confusion in me. I don't understand it.

And then this other big question arises: Do the different things that people say lead to the same result or not? And is that even really the right question? That's my question. How would we know? But these are some of the things that we have been rattling around together in our brief time as we were preparing for this conversation today.

So, thank you.

---

Hello. My name is Guo Gu, and I represent the Chan tradition. It's not too popular of a tradition.

My practice journey started in 1972 when I was four, with my first teacher, Master Guan Qing in Taiwan, who was an ascetic known for his samādhi practices. We used to visit him on a weekly basis, and he taught me how to meditate at that time. But being so young, I was basically just a kid running around the temple, playing with whatever I could find. What I loved most was simply to be in his presence.

Then my family migrated to the United States, and that's when I met my root teacher, Master Sheng Yen, at eleven. He was like my father. He was also very different from other monks that I'd known. He was able to connect with me, just a mere kid. And he tricked me into doing retreats with him—he asked me to stay overnight, my mom had to stay overnight—so we started to practice with him.

He started taking me back to Taiwan when I was in college, kind of priming me. Later I found out this was very unusual, because all the monastics were wondering, who is this kid? After I graduated, I became his attendant monk and served him. He taught me everything—from how to cook, how to clean, how to practice, and how to offer myself to the benefit of others. The slogan he had for me was: "Body like a rag, mind like a mirror." That stuck with me, and eventually it was that teaching that flourished.

Practicing with a teacher is very important. I know that in the West, there is this phenomenon of getting a little bit here, getting a little bit there, compiling one's own version of the Buddha Dharma based on what one resonates with. That could be a little dangerous, so perhaps I'll say something about that.

For those of you who need some context: the Chan tradition in China, on the practice end of things, comes to us in two primary forms. One is called silent illumination practice. It's a poetic way of saying selfless function, but you could also say it's a simultaneous practice of samatha-vipassanā. That's one stream of practice. The other is what I call the practice of wonderment. The traditional word is *huatou*, critical phrase.

And the point of which is to generate, cultivate, and tune into the sense of not knowing—the sense of openness, the sense of wonderment—and allow that to bring one from scattered to concentrated to unified, and then to the shattering of that sense of wonderment into awakening. So these are the two primary paths, and I may say something more about that.

I'll share a little bit about my own journey. In this lifetime, I encountered the Dhamma just shortly after college, back in 1987, in the form of some books and a young woman who had been sent by her teacher from Europe to Miami, Florida, of all places, to try to establish a sangha. I practiced as a layperson for a very long time. I got married, had a beautiful daughter with whom I'm very close, then got divorced, and then I moved. Throughout all of that time, I had been practicing in small, very small sanghas—that's all there was at that time out there—and doing a lot of reading.

Eventually I moved to California, to the Bay Area, and got involved with San Francisco Zen Center. I took my lay bodhisattva precepts with Shosan Victoria Austin, who much later also gave me Dharma transmission. But after moving into Zen Center, I went with a friend to Japan for a five-day sesshin with Sekkei Harada Roshi, who was his teacher. As I told everyone when I came back, up until that point practicing the Dhamma had been like exploring the four corners of the earth. But meeting with Harada Roshi was like being shot off in a rocket. The vastness of his teaching was almost daunting, really.

So I came back, I quit my job, had a chat with my daughter, and moved out to Japan. I was ordained in 2007, trained there for a couple of years, and then came back to San Francisco Zen Center as a nun. Interestingly, it was around that time of my coming back from Japan that I started to become exposed to the Nikāyas, the Pāli suttas, and really started delving deeply into that.

After various and sundry things, I ordained as a Theravāda nun—first as a samaneri, then as a bhikkhuni for five years. Although I've set that practice down, that is most definitely my path. That's why I still use the name. I no longer follow the bhikkhuni precepts; I still follow the sixteen bodhisattva precepts and the eight Theravāda precepts.

What else would be helpful to know about me? In addition to being a mom, I'm a chaplain. I've been both a hospital and a hospice chaplain. I also fairly recently went out to London for a while and did a master's degree in Buddhist art history. I paint watercolors, I babysit my grandson, and I share the Dhamma as best I can.

In terms of what I want to share, I'm going to say a little bit about Dōgen's comments on awakening, but what I really want to do is talk about how early Buddhism provides a path for studying and breaking through both experience and non-experience. Nibbāna is non-experience—both of those two things are described there.

I often tell people that Sōtō Zen in particular, which is the lineage I am ordained in, has very good teachings for beginners. For me in particular, it was very important to learn how to sit zazen—just sit down and not have a plan. It also has good teachings about the end, about what being awake is like. But that middle part of the path is difficult, I would say, in Sōtō. It's a bit of a ramble. What I find in the Nikāyas is that there is very, very clear instruction for both what I think of as the middle part of the path and also the end. So I'm going to talk a little bit about those aspects and see if we can make some of the threads more clear.

I joined the Peace Corps after I finished college. I had studied philosophy at Columbia in New York and then joined the Peace Corps. This was in 1965. I spent two years there, and when I first went, I was teaching in a school in Bangkok that was right down the block from a famous temple, the Marble Temple. There were two monks, one English monk and one Indian monk, who were holding classes for Westerners who wanted to learn about Buddhism. So I started going to these classes.

I was asking so many questions that people stopped coming to the group. You've probably all been in a group with people like that. So finally, one of the monks said, "Joseph, why don't you try meditating?" I was young—twenty-one years old—and it was all very exotic to me. It was the first time I was in the Far East, with the Buddhism and

the temples and meditation. He gave me some really basic instructions: just sit down and watch the breath. I gathered some cushions, sat down, and set my alarm clock for five minutes, because I didn't want to sit too long.

But something really remarkable happened. Even in those first five minutes, it showed me that there was a way to look into the mind as well as looking out through it, and that there was a methodology for doing it. I got so excited that I started inviting my friends over to watch me meditate—which I'm still doing. Thank you all for coming.

So that was the beginning. I kept my practice in that very beginner's kind of way. And then something very interesting happened at the very end of my Peace Corps stay, just a couple of weeks before I was about to leave. A friend of mine and I were sitting in the garden of his house in Bangkok, and he was reading from a Tibetan text. My mind was for some reason really still and concentrated, and just in listening to that text, I had an experience that had a tremendous impact on my life—really set the direction of my life.

Then I went back to the States and realized I needed a teacher. It was very hard to comprehend exactly what it was all about. So I went back to India to look for a teacher. I traveled around various ashrams and ended up in Bodh Gaya, which is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. There I met my first teacher, Anagarika Munindra-ji, who had just come back from what I think was nine years of study and practice in Burma, teaching vipassana in the traditional lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw.

He said something to me when I first met him. I was just this young guy, twenty-three years old. The first thing he said was, "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it." It just made so much sense to me. It was just so much common sense, because I thought, how else can we understand our minds except by sitting down and observing and looking and investigating and understanding? So it was really from that moment that I was hooked—hooked into the Dharma, hooked into that form of practice. I spent most of the next seven years in India practicing with Munindra-ji and also with Goenka-ji. They taught different methods, but they were both different forms of vipassana.

Then I came back to the States in 1974 and started teaching. A couple of years later we started IMS, the Meditation Center. For the first ten years or so I was going around doing a lot of teaching, and then through a certain set of circumstances I met Sayadaw U Pandita, a Burmese teacher and one of the great vipassana masters in Burma. He was a very demanding teacher—tough. He was like a fierce Zen master, and tremendously helpful. Because Munindra-ji was more like a Taoist, very easy. His mantra was, "Be

simple and easy. Be simple and easy about things, about your life, about your practice." Whereas Sayadaw U Pandita was just the opposite: "Don't be simple and easy. Make this heroic effort in practice."

At that time, for me, it was a good balance. I really needed it—like a kick in the pants in terms of my practice. So I spent quite a few years doing many retreats with Sayadaw U Pandita.

Sometime in the nineties—I can't remember the exact dates—some friends in the Tibetan tradition invited myself and a few others to go to Nepal and meet some of their teachers. These turned out to be some of the really great Dzogchen masters of the last century: Tulku Urgyen and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. I got an introduction to the Dzogchen teachings and began a little bit of practice in that lineage—not nearly as long as I had spent doing vipassana, but it was enough to get a real taste of what that practice was about and a deeper understanding of it. Then one of those teachers, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, came to the States and taught a two-month Dzogchen retreat, which I attended.

And there were two things that happened in that retreat—one was tremendously positive and impactful, and the other was very confusing.

What was so helpful, and what I felt in one way was the missing piece in my own practice, were the teachings of what is called bodhicitta—the aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all beings and to cultivate that motivation. For me, the understanding all along had been that my practice would inevitably help other beings, because how could it not? If we purify our own minds, it will have a positive effect on everybody we meet. But instead of seeing it as the end result, after hearing Nyoshul Khen teach about bodhicitta, I realized: No, I can put this up front as the very motivation for practice. And that really enlarged my sense of what the practice was about. So that was very, very meaningful in my unfolding.

What was a bit confusing was the description of what we might call ultimate reality. The Tibetan Dzogchen view of that was very different than how it's framed in Theravada and Vipassana practice. And so for about a month of that retreat, when I should have been doing Dzogchen practice, I was just tormenting myself: "Who's right?" Because they were saying opposite things about what I felt to be the most important question in my life.

I finally resolved it, at least for that time, with a phrase that came to mind. Actually, I resolved it in two ways. One is, I couldn't even know who was right. Maybe when I'm fully enlightened, I'll know—and maybe it won't even be important at that point. But

what really helped me, and was the foundation of my first understanding of what I call One Dharma, was understanding metaphysics—the metaphysical descriptions of things—as being skillful means for non-clinging. Because at that time I really understood non-clinging to be a foundational aspect of liberation. So "metaphysics as skillful means" became my mantra. And then I realized, well, it doesn't matter if the metaphysics are different. If they help us free our minds from clinging, that's serving its purpose.

And so that was the beginning of just trying to understand how we can appreciate different traditions, even when they're saying quite different things, in a way that's useful to us and not problematic.

Since that time—and let's talk a little bit about this tomorrow—I've come to reformulate my idea of skillful means and metaphysics. I'll be talking about some of the areas in our lives where we do habitually cling, and just highlight those areas that we should pay attention to. And then I'll speak about some rather esoteric aspects of the Dharma, of my own experience, and where I am at the moment. Thank you.

And then in the afternoon, I believe we have Anne and Guagu. And then Saturday morning, we'll have Dhammadipa. The second half of Saturday morning, we'll break into smaller groups of about four with each of the six of us for about forty minutes and then have a larger conversation. In the afternoon, John will share, and then we'll have more collaborative time and also more on Sunday morning. So that is the basic structure of our time together. Does anybody have any questions about any of that?

For those of you who are here in Barre, in the evenings tomorrow and Saturday, there will be time for some small group and larger group discussion and more silent sitting time. So there will be time to connect and share in a little bit more of a structured way.

Let us take an eight-minute bio break, and then we will come back for a final period of shared silence together, and then we'll go into noble silence.

---

You might take a moment to simply notice the contact, the felt sense of contact with your cushion, with your seat. Just feeling it, sensing it, brings you into the present moment. Also, when you sense that contact, you are sensing support. You might say you are sensing that you are being held. You are being held in a way that you directly experience. It's not an idea—you feel that contact.

Another way, if you like, of sensing the power of that contact is to recognize that what you are feeling here, that support, right now, is actually rising to hold you from the very center of this earth. You have a deep seat held from the depths. You may find that simply recognizing this truth, there's a little more ease in the body, a little more relaxation. You are being held. Without doing anything, you have support. It's not a job you need to take up. So your shoulders can be at ease. The muscles of your lower body can be at ease. Because in fact, seated in this way, resting deeply, your upper body rising forth, your skeletal structure supports you. You can let go. You will be held from within. Letting go and letting be, ease of mind.

You may notice small tensions in your body, in your hands, in your neck. Just bringing your attention to them may allow them to dissolve. And as your body is more and more at ease—or if it's not, simply notice that—your body is more and more at ease and at the same time very alive. Little sensations here and there. And most obvious is the sensation of your breath.

Feeling how the mind can ride the breath, not observing it from a distance, but feeling it, sensing it, riding it into your body, the in-breath down. And the particular sense of relaxation when you exhale—*ah*. The body is more at rest. The breath is more at rest. The mind is more at rest. Settling occurs just naturally. We can enjoy that settling.

As the settling progresses, consider letting your mind ride your next inhalation into your body and down. Let the energy of your in-breath carry your attention, your mind, into your deep belly. Very stable, the most stable resting place inside the body. Four fingers beneath your navel, four fingers in—or what might just feel to you like your center of balance. Letting your belly relax and your attention be deep within.

You may notice that as a thought begins to take over, be curious: what happens? What happens to your attention settling deep in your belly? Does it stay? Does it wander off with the thought? And how does that feel? Be curious about how it feels. Bring your attention back there if you can, very gently. Maybe there's a tendency for it to pop back up again. That's interesting. Is that because you've become a little more tense? Even very subtly?

Rest in your belly. See how it is to explore the possibility of resting your attention in your belly.

The Dantien, the Hara, the Do in Tibetan—many traditions recognize the importance of this place. Maybe this is new to you. Maybe you'd prefer to do what you're more familiar with. That's understandable. That's fine, of course. But perhaps we can be curious together. How is it to rest attention deep in the belly?

With your attention gently settled deep in your belly, you can see about noticing the alignment that runs down through the center of your body. This place deep in your belly is in direct alignment with the center of the earth. And that alignment, just naturally, the way the human body is, continues. The center of the earth, deep belly, your heart. Your heart is also supported from the very center of the earth. Our hearts can relax.

And the alignment continues through your throat, your crown. If you're so inclined, consider bringing your attention up and down from your deep belly up this central corridor through your body, up past your heart, your throat, your crown, and down again, just to feel what it feels like. It's a deep and sacred place in the body.

I invite you then to bring your attention very gently to your heart center—not your physical heart, but at the level of the heart deep in your chest, that point along this axis, this corridor. It may feel a little different than the belly center.

And in closing, by way of dedicating our practice, sharing our practice with all beings throughout space and everyone right here, you may imagine, feel, sense that there's an orb of light in the center of your heart. It's just there. And inside it, the letter A, which we pronounce AH—symbol of wisdom.

And with your next exhale together, we can sound the sound AH, feeling, if you like, that sound as well as light. It is so as long as you imagine it to be so. This isn't a big job. Sound and light and mind all together go out, sending grace, blessings, good wishes to everyone in the room, to everyone throughout Massachusetts, the country, the world, and by the end of your sounding, the whole cosmos receiving your light and the gift of your practice.

Good night.

CHAPTER 79

# Session with Joseph Goldstein: Non-Clinging, Māna, and the Unborn

Joseph Goldstein · 2h36

> *In this profound dialogue session, Joseph Goldstein examines the Buddha's teaching that 'nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine,' identifying key arenas where attachment manifests: sense pleasures, meditative states, views and opinions, and most fundamentally, the view of self. He shares a pivotal interview with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita who observed he was 'too attached to subtlety,' illustrating how even refined practice can become an object of clinging.*
>
> *Goldstein explores the defilement of māna (conceit or 'I am-ness'), which persists even after identity view is uprooted, manifesting as comparing mind and the projection of self over time. Drawing from Mūlapariyāya Sutta (MN 1), he describes an unexpected experience where the instruction 'stop conceiving' temporarily dissolved all sense of I-amness, connecting this to the Bāhiya Sutta's teaching: 'In the seen, just the seen.'*
>
> *The talk distinguishes two meanings of 'the unborn': rigpa as ever-present awareness in Dzogchen, and nibbāna as cessation in early Buddhism. Citing Korean Seon master Chinul's framework of 'sudden awakening, gradual cultivation,' Goldstein emphasizes that even genuine realization leaves work to be done—the Buddha compared stream-enterers to 'feeble young calves' crossing a ford. The session includes dialogue with Guo Gu on Chan perspectives and concludes with a guided meditation using passive voice framing ('a sound being known') to touch the selfless nature of experience.*

So we'll begin this morning with a twenty-minute practice. I invite you to take refuge, and I will use a refuge formula from the Bodhicaryavatara, the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.

*Buddham gacchami saranam yavanabodhi mandata dharmam gacchami saranam bodhisattva ganantata buddham gacchami saranam yavanabodhi mandata.*

I go for refuge in the Buddha, I go for refuge in the Dharma, and I go for refuge to the host of bodhisattvas until I attain awakening.

And now, bringing to mind your closest teacher or teachers. Feeling their presence in the space before you. Feeling them connecting to their teachers and their teachers' teachers. Have a sense of their kindness. Feel your gratitude and allow that connection

to bring forth as light from them a blessing that enters the top of your head, gently fills your body with the blessings of wisdom and compassion, and brings to mind your highest aspiration—perhaps the aspiration of bodhicitta, to attain awakening for the sake of all beings.

Settle now into your practice. I invite you to practice whatever you like, but you might consider these simple instructions: Do not follow the past. Do not anticipate the future. Allow the mind of now to settle non-conceptually and clearly.

It can be difficult to follow such simple instructions. Just allowing the mind to settle on its own, not making it settle, not trying to do anything, not trying to fix the mind, not correcting anything. If thoughts capture attention, simply look at the thought. Recognize the thought as a thought. The thought is not what it represents. It's just a thought.

If the mind is too scattered, you may settle the attention on the sensations of breathing at the abdomen. But this is not your object of meditation. You're just giving the mind something to do. So allow it to do that and sit back and let go if you can.

If you don't stir up the water, it's translucent. If you don't try to fix the mind, it will be clear. Just allow it to settle.

Saraha said, his mind tied up in knots, if you just let go, it will be free—there is no doubt.

In these last moments, here's an invitation: let go even of the idea that you're meditating.

---

Last night as I was talking a little bit about the evolution of One Dharma, my idea of it anyway, I started out with that phrase "metaphysics as skillful means." That is, different metaphysical systems could be understood as skillful means for non-clinging, which is foundational to liberation.

But that was back in 2003, and in the years following, my understanding has changed a little bit. I kind of reversed the order—from metaphysics as skillful means to letting go or not clinging as skillful means for different metaphysical ends. Because I've come to understand, at least for now, that there are some significant differences between or among the different Buddhist traditions. And it felt to me that it was important to acknowledge the differences.

If you remember in the article, there was just one small section at the end where I highlighted some of the differences. So since you've all seen the booklet, today I'd like to elaborate on a few points in it and also to talk about a few things from my experience which I didn't include in the article.

So since non-clinging is one theme of this conference, I thought to begin the talk by highlighting some of the arenas that the Buddha pointed out in which we very habitually do cling. Because if we're clear about where clinging shows up most predominantly, then it becomes easier to recognize it—and if we're lucky, to let go.

One of the most obvious arenas of clinging, one we're most familiar with, I think, is clinging to sense pleasures. We like them. We like them because they're pleasant. And this attachment to sense pleasures, or the idea that somehow they will bring us some kind of fulfillment, is so embedded in our culture. I want to just mention a few advertisements I've seen over the years in magazines, storefront windows, on the internet: "Don't let desire pass you by." "Increase your desire"—as if that's a good idea. "The joy of getting more." "I don't let anything stand in the way of my pleasure." This is what we've been fed our whole lives.

Even as we acknowledge that we probably all do find some gratification in these sense pleasures—we enjoy them and they bring a kind of happiness—I think we all know that in the end they don't really deliver on their promise, which is why we're all here. So that's one very common area where we could watch our minds to see whether the craving leads to clinging or not.

On a more subtle level, we very easily can cling to different meditative states. As the practice deepens, we may experience a lot of light, or calm, or rapture, clarity, joy—a lot of very pleasant meditative states. And it's very easy to then get attached to them and to start practicing for them, instead of seeing that they too are just arising and passing phenomena.

I had a very powerful interview with Sayadaw U Pandita. I had been in Burma for a few months at that point, and my practice, I felt, was really deepening quite a bit. I was beginning to see the momentary nature of things at such refined levels. It was like each sensation in my body—as I was watching the sensation, I felt it just becoming like small distinct beads that were getting smaller and smaller and smaller. And I thought, oh boy, this is really seeing into impermanence. So I felt really good about it. I go into my interview with Sayadaw, I give him this report, and his only comment was: "You're too attached to subtlety."

It was so revealing, because here I was thinking this is really good practice. But I wasn't assessing that in terms of what my mind was doing. I was assessing it in terms of what was being seen, missing completely the attachment to that level of subtlety. So clinging can take many forms, and sometimes it's very hard to see.

The third arena of clinging—after sense pleasures and meditative states—has tremendous application for our lives in the world. That is attachment to our views and opinions about things, attachment to being right. And what's so amazing is that often we're attached or cling to our opinions about things we know nothing about. But it does not stop us from having this strong opinion.

I want to share a story that has to do with Sariputta, who is the chief disciple of the Buddha, foremost in wisdom, and Dudjom Rinpoche, who was one of the great Tibetan meditation masters of the last century, also renowned for his great wisdom. This was in 1974. I was teaching at Naropa Institute in Boulder—it was the first summer that they opened—and I was walking around. Dudjom Rinpoche was visiting then and giving a talk. Just a little aside: some of you may not know, but the study center actually was given some relics of Sariputta, which are in the stupa. So you might want to visit—you never know.

I was walking around and I saw a poster advertising the talk he was going to give. And the poster said something which just put my mind on tilt. It said: "Dudjom Rinpoche, incarnation of Sariputta." Now, I don't know if that's anywhere in that Tibetan tradition or not, but it was on the poster. So I looked at that, having spent the last twenty, thirty years in Burmese Vipassana, quite certain that Sariputta was not reborn.

Because arhants, that's the fruit of arhantship, according to the Pali canon, early Buddhism. So that was on one side—this is impossible. On the other side, Dudjom Rinpoche was a great master. And well, how to reconcile those two?

The reconciliation turned out to be very simple: I had no idea. All I knew was that the Burmese said this is not possible, while at least the poster representing Tibetan Buddhism said this is how it is. And to realize that I didn't have to have an opinion about what I didn't know—it's amazing that it took that to realize that we don't have to have opinions about things we don't know, even if we've been conditioned to think in a certain way. So that was really helpful.

It's instructive to really investigate, I think, or take interest when we're expressing some strong opinion. Just ask ourselves: is this something that I really know from experience, or am I just repeating what I've been taught or heard? At least we can acknowledge that.

It's also wise to keep an open mind about things that we think we do know from experience, because it's easy to develop attachment even to knowledge that we have, and to genuine insights that we may have had. The attachment to them does not enhance the insight—it's just grasping, just holding. And I saw this so clearly in myself in the very early years of my teaching, going back fifty years now. Looking back, I remember getting into these fierce Dharma arguments with friends about different Dharma points, and I was so firmly fixed in my idea of what I understood. Over the years that has happily lessened, and it's reflected in my now favorite definition of enlightenment, which is: lightening up.

In some way it's amusing, but I think it actually has deep meaning. We are lightening up the more we let go of both self-view and attachment to our views and opinions, not taking ourselves quite so seriously.

Just as a little footnote to not taking ourselves so seriously: in meditation, one of the things that I've found most helpful is having a sense of humor about my own mind. One meditator once came into an interview, giving a report on his practice. His great conclusion, his great insight was: the mind has no pride. Anybody who's watched their minds will know it will and can do anything. So we want to have a sense of humor about what's actually arising, so that we don't get so caught, so identified with it.

When we cling to our own points of view, even if they're based on some genuine insight, it really closes off the possibility of opening to other points of view, to other possible ways of understanding the Dharma, of understanding ourselves. And when we do cling in that way—to points of view, to meditative points of view, to points of view about the Dharma—it really plants the seeds for a lot of sectarian conflict.

We see this right in Buddhist traditions. What's so amazing to me is that often lineages within a tradition, that can be so close, are often the ones that get into the biggest fights about which is right and which is more pure and which is authentic. All of that is just attachment to view, attachment to opinion. It's not helpful. And we can see the tremendous danger of this in the world today, among different religious traditions—how much conflict and violence is happening because of that attachment to view.

So we want to watch in our own minds and the way we engage in Dharma conversation, just to watch out for when we're getting tight in some way in our expression of what we understand.

There is another possibility. I saw it very clearly at a Buddhist-Christian conference that I was part of at Gethsemane Abbey, the Trappist Abbey where Thomas Merton stayed for a long time. There were twenty-five Buddhists and twenty-five Christian monastics—Benedictine and Trappist. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was there. We would meet every day in the chapter house, with different people giving presentations and then discussion.

One day after the meeting, we were walking outside of the chapter house down a long corridor. At the end of the corridor was a little niche with a statue of the Virgin Mary. As we were filing out, I happened to be just a little way behind His Holiness, who was walking ahead. As I got to the end of the corridor, he stopped and bowed down to the Virgin Mary. Growing up Jewish, it was the last thing in the world that I would have thought to do.

It would never have even entered my mind to stop and bow to that statue of the Virgin Mary. But when I saw the Dalai Lama do that, it just opened something up. Yes—bowing to qualities of compassion, bowing to qualities of love, bowing to all the things that are common in our understanding of the Dharma or spiritual path. And again, it just opened my mind to see how easy it is to get confined, either by attachment to view or our cultural conditioning or how we're brought up, where we narrow our relationship to other ways, other expressions of understanding what our highest values may be.

And then interestingly enough, at the very end of that conference, the abbot of Gethsemane got up and was acknowledging the conference and thanking everybody for coming, this cross-religious dialogue. And he said that what he felt was the most meaningful exchange, the most meaningful expression of traditions coming together, was that he had seen the Dalai Lama bow. It's so meaningful to me—I can feel my eyes tearing up just when I think of it. So it's possible, I think, if we can see where we're holding, to open to a much broader, much more inclusive way of relating to the spiritual path.

The deepest attachment we have—and this is of course central to the Buddha's teaching—the attachment that so conditions our lives and our understanding is the attachment to, the clinging to, the view of self. The idea that there is someone behind all experience to whom it is happening. So that's where a lot of the investigation and our meditative exploration takes place. That's the arena in which we can really take a deep dive.

In many of the discourses in the Pali Canon, there are very clear expressions of both the means and the outcome of the practice. It's actually expressed in just one line: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine." Non-clinging is the means. The understanding of non-self is the fruition of our practice. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine.

I don't know if you recall, but in the article there was a short quote by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I wanted to repeat it because it just emphasizes this point. He wrote: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering in the lower realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. The idea of an enduring self—it is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of the one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others."

This is pointing really to what I would say is in some way the essence or key point of our practice: cutting through basically the illusion of self, of "I." And this is very deeply conditioned, as we all know. Our whole lives revolve around a self-center. And it's our Dharma practice which can really help us find the zero center rather than the self center.

The fruition of non-clinging and this transformative realization of non-self is often described in various Buddhist traditions as the experience of the unborn. The unborn. And from that first experience I had at the end of my Peace Corps time in Thailand to many years later in my initial practice in Dzogchen, I came to realize that the word "unborn" can mean two quite different things. And these two things in one way help explain the historical divergence of different Buddhist traditions. So I just want to mention briefly two ways of understanding what unborn means.

In one meaning, unborn can refer to a capacity for awareness that is always there, and therefore unborn—it's always there, always has been there. And one expression of this is the Dzogchen description of what is called rigpa. That's usually described as the union of clarity or cognizance and emptiness. It's also sometimes described as self-existing wakefulness—because it's just unborn, an awareness, a self-existing wakefulness that is always there. The practice is really recognizing that and coming to rest in that, to stabilize it.

The second meaning of unborn is the reality of nibbāna. Now I'm referring to the understanding in early Buddhism. So the second meaning of unborn is the reality of nibbāna as cessation, non-occurrence. That before something occurs, it's unborn. Non-manifestation even of awareness or cognizance. And this unborn is not a mere nothingness. This is where the different Buddhist traditions have been going back and forth for

two thousand years. But in the understanding of early Buddhism, this meaning of unborn—non-occurrence, cessation, non-manifestation—is not mere nothingness. It is its own reality. That's why it's described in the texts often as the nibbāna element. And there's a famous sutta where the Buddha is saying, "There is an unborn, unmanifest, unformed"—a lot of "uns."

And if there were not this reality, the freedom from samsara would not be possible. Without getting into the philosophical debate about that, the essential point is what the Buddha is saying—and those who have experienced it know for themselves—that it is not a blank nothingness. It is its own reality. And as the Buddha said very often, this is very subtle and hard to understand.

One analogy I have found helpful: if we think of the unborn as analogous to the number zero, nothing manifests. It's zero. But zero has its own power. Zero has its own function. Zero has its own reality, even though there's nothing manifest in zero. Years ago I came across a book called *The Nothing That Is* by Robert Kaplan—a history of the number zero. When I just saw the title, *The Nothing That Is*, I loved it. I thought that is the perfect description, or perhaps not perfect, but a good analogy for this meaning of unborn. The first line in the book was: "If you look at zero, you see nothing. Look through it and you see the world." I love that expression. That's about as far as I could get in the book, because it started to get very mathematical and technical.

This last meaning of unborn is pretty classical Theravada teaching, although it's worth acknowledging that some teachers in the Thai forest tradition hold a view of nibbana that actually seems closer to the first meaning of unborn. So even within Theravada, there are some divergent views. But for the most part, the classical interpretation is what I've just mentioned.

When we think of these two meanings—using a kind of shorthand: Rigpa, or awareness always there, self-existing wakefulness, and the experience of cessation, of zero—we find they are different, with different implications for how we practice, and also very different implications for what happens to a fully realized being at the time of their death. The two different Buddhist traditions will have very different understandings of what occurs.

But even though there are these significant differences, each in its own way frees the mind from identity view, frees the mind from the sense of self, the view of self, the belief in self. In the early Buddhist view, identity view is uprooted from the very first realized glimpse of nibbana, of touching that zero center. A function of that experience is to

uproot from our mind stream the view of self, because in that moment it has been transcended. We've experienced the reality beyond it, and from that point on, we're no longer holding that view.

From the other side, identity view is weakened and eliminated through the practice of stabilizing the realization of Rigpa, because in Rigpa also, identity view is not present. If my colleagues in the Tibetan traditions feel I say anything incorrect, they can let me know in one of the panel discussions.

But there's an important caution here in all of these traditions, whether we're practicing the later traditions which often emphasize this self-existing awareness as the ultimate understanding, or early Buddhism which sees nibbana, the cessation even of awareness, as the ultimate reality. The same caution applies: namely, that the uprooting of identity view, by whatever means, still leaves a lot to be done.

There's a very vivid example of this in a simile the Buddha gave, described in the Pali texts, for the different stages of awakening. The simile really struck me because it highlights this point so clearly. He likened people on the path to a herd of cattle crossing a ford in a very fast-moving river—quite challenging for the herd to cross over. He said the strong bulls and great mother cows cross quite easily, corresponding to those who are either fully enlightened or what are called non-returners, the third stage of enlightenment, but powerfully awakened because they have already uprooted desire and aversion. You can imagine it's quite an accomplishment. These are the powerful practitioners who cross quite easily. Then come the young cattle, who have attenuated desire and aversion. They cross, but with a little less firm footing than the great bulls and strong mother cows. And finally the stream-enterers—these are people, again in the tradition of early Buddhism, who have already uprooted identity view, who have had the first glimpse of nibbana. This is not a small accomplishment. The view of self has been uprooted. But the Buddha likened them to feeble young calves who will make it across, but with difficulty.

The image points out that even practitioners who have had deep realization and have uprooted the view of self are not quite at the beginning, but there is still a lot of work to do for full awakening. As I mentioned in the article, I think this is so important to emphasize, because something I've seen—and perhaps many of you have seen—is that very often people can have genuine realization and some really deep understanding, and then get attached to that as if everything is done. These folks can then get engaged in rather unskillful behavior, thinking it's all coming from their deep realization, but it's not. It's really coming from all the work that still needs to be done. It's important that this be seen and understood.

So how do we reconcile the uprooting of identity view with the understanding that there's still a lot more to do?

And I came across it in a book on the teachings of the 11th or 12th century Korean Zen master, Chinul. There's a book of his teachings called *Tracing Back the Radiance*. It's a wonderful book highlighting his teachings, and he framed them in a way that I so appreciate. The frame for all of his teaching was sudden awakening, gradual cultivation.

So he's acknowledging, yes, awakening can be a sudden moment where we really penetrate through the illusion of self. But that's not enough. Sudden awakening, gradual cultivation—that's what's needed after those moments.

This is what he said, and I think you'll recognize very clearly the point that he makes: "Although we have awakened to original nature"—here's the line—"beginningless habit energies are extremely difficult to remove suddenly. Hindrances are formidable and habits are deeply ingrained."

I love that. Hindrances are formidable. They are, and they are deeply ingrained. And that's why even after a moment of sudden awakening, the gradual cultivation is necessary.

He goes on: "After awakening you must constantly be on your guard. If deluded thoughts suddenly appear, do not follow after them. Then and only then will your practice reach completion." But then he adds a very important point: "Although you must cultivate further, you have already awakened suddenly to the fact that deluded thoughts are originally void and the mind's nature is originally pure."

Do you see how he puts it together? He's acknowledging the power, the transformative power of that moment of cutting through, that moment of going beyond the view of self. He acknowledges the power of that and how it changes how we relate to everything in our lives. And yet the gradual cultivation still needs to happen. For all of us, and certainly for myself, I felt that this is a very complete expression of how our path unfolds.

In the Theravada tradition, there is a pretty clear framework for understanding these two elements—sudden awakening and gradual cultivation. As I mentioned, from the first glimpse of Nibbana, the view of self is uprooted. That's gone; it is not going to arise again. From that point on, there is no doubt about the path. Enlightenment is guaranteed. We're firmly on the path, and there's no going back. But still, the other defilements remain. We're still like the feeble young cattle. There's still desire and aversion and restlessness and conceit. All of these qualities are still present in our mind.

I want to spend a little time focusing on the particular defilement of conceit, which in Pali is called *māna*, because it highlights how we can have realized the truth—realized the truth of non-self—yet still have a persistent, underlying feeling of "I am." That's the meaning of *māna*. It's translated as conceit, but there are different connotations in English. In this Buddhist context, conceit is this I am-ness. It can be very obvious, and it can be a very subtle background.

*Māna*, this conceit of "I am," can take different forms. It can take the form of comparing ourselves with others—I am this in relationship to others. That is, feeling better than, feeling worse than, feeling equal to. We may think, "Well, I don't really do that." But it would really be interesting to notice—I've observed this in myself. We meet somebody, maybe for the first time, and we're friendly and engaging. But how often are there some background thoughts of comparison going on? "Oh, they're shorter than I am." Or whatever. "They have more hair than I do." It can be that trivial, or it can be a little more meaningful.

But that's an expression of this māna, this conceit—"I am" in relationship to this.

It can also refer to the projection of this "I am-ness" over time. Every time we're caught up in thoughts of, "Oh, I was this," or "I did this in the past"—notice what the subject of that sentence is. "I was this in the past. I did this in the past." Projected into the future: "I will do this. I will go there." And of course in the present: "I am this now."

So this māna—I hope you can get a sense of why it's so deeply conditioned, why this pattern continues even after the view of self has been uprooted. We understand that there's no self, but "I am-ness" continues until full enlightenment. That's how deeply conditioned it is.

But because identity view has been uprooted, we can then begin to see māna. Even these thoughts and feelings associated with "I am," this "I am-ness"—we begin to experience and understand the very "I am-ness" as being selfless. It's just a pattern. It's a deeply rooted pattern that's there until full awakening, but after having uprooted identity view, we see: yes, this is just an empty pattern, empty of self. We see this as being selfless.

Having finally put all this together, these days I am totally delighted when I see māna arise in my mind. I love it. And I love it for two reasons. And it arises quite enough to be delighted a lot of the time.

One of the reasons I'm delighted is that I would much rather see it than not see it—to recognize, "Oh yeah, that's māna," instead of not recognizing it and being caught up and identified with that pattern. So just the seeing of it is freeing.

And then the second reason I'm so delighted is knowing that it's not uprooted till full enlightenment. Every time I see it—"Oh, māna"—I feel like I'm working on full enlightenment. I'm working on the end of the path. So that gives me a lot of joy to see that, okay, I'm really investigating something that is that deep.

This understanding has very practical applications. I'll tell a little story about this. I think most of you know Bhikkhu Anālayo, who lives right down the lane here. We had become friends during the time that he's been living here at the Study Center. And one year—he's on retreat a lot of the time—during one period, we were both going to be on retreat at the same time. I was doing a self-retreat in my home, just up the road. He was down in his cottage here. So I knew we were both practicing.

And in my practice, just one afternoon, I was frittering away some time. I didn't know what I was doing. And the thought that arose in my mind was, "I'll bet Anālayo doesn't fritter away his time. He's so disciplined and such a good yogi." When I had that thought, I just started getting down on myself a little bit. "Joseph, get it together. Be a little more disciplined."

But it didn't take long—I don't know, maybe five minutes of wallowing in that self-judgment—and then I realized: that's just māna. That's just comparing mind. As soon as I recognized māna—yeah, just another empty selfless pattern—in the moment that I recognized it for what it was, the whole thing just dissolved. The comparing dissolved.

All the feelings I had about that self-judgment dissolved because I recognized that it was just mana creating that result.

I find this tremendously freeing because we get caught up in this kind of comparing so often. And then to the degree that we're identified with it, we can have all kinds of self-judgment going on. To see it for what it is, is very freeing.

A few years ago, I had an experience which really showed me the very ways conceit, this conceit of "I am," arises and is sustained. It turned out to reveal just how radical the Buddhist teachings are.

Just as a little side note, the usual refrain at the end of the Buddhist discourses—again, these are in the Pali Canon—the little sentence at the end of almost every discourse is, "The bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words." But at the end of one sutta, it says, "The bhikkhus did not delight in the Buddha's words." That's very startling.

This is at the end of the first discourse in the Middle-Length Sayings called "The Root of Existence." It's a difficult sutta to understand. It describes the very subtle ways the sense of self is conceived in the very subtle stances the mind takes in relationship to experience. This is pre-thought, way beneath the level of thought. Just in the course of everything we do, the mind takes stances, different stances, in relationship to those experiences. This sutta describes four different stances the mind takes which create—and the Buddhist term is "conceives of"—the view of self.

I had read this many times, and kind of my mind glazed over it a little bit because the sutta is very complicated. I thought, well, that's interesting Buddhist philosophy. But what I've done for quite a few years now on my self-retreats, instead of reading the suttas, I listen to them on Audible. They're all there. For one credit, you get the whole Majjhima Nikaya. It's quite amazing, and it's read really well. I've just taken to listening to the sutras, so it's like the Buddha's giving the evening dharma talk.

What I found is that listening, things go in in a very different way. For me—and I think perhaps it's common—much more powerful. Every retreat I do, every self-retreat, I'm always learning something from the suttas that I had read but hadn't had any impact. In listening, suddenly: oh, that's what this is about.

In listening to this very complicated sutta, there was one aspect that became clear. The four ways it describes the stance the mind can take in relationship to experience: it can conceive, and again, this is pre-thought, not thinking about this, just a habitual way of relating. We could conceive of the self as being the experience—"I am this experience." Or we can conceive of the self as being in the experience, or being apart from the experience, or that the experience belongs to me. Those are the four ways outlined in the sutta.

When I heard this, it was particularly one of those stances that, as I was listening, just jumped out. I could connect totally with what it was saying. It was very apparent, kind of in walking meditation. It was the line "conceive of the self being apart from experience." I realized that when I'm walking—and it's in the sitting too, but it was just very obvious in the walking—being really mindful, mindful of the sensations and of the movement and all of that, the mind was taking a stance apart from it, in being mindful of it. That was just super clear to me.

After I had heard this, I was outside walking up and down my driveway. I wasn't doing the Vipassana creeping along—I was walking at a more or less normal pace, but being mindful. And seeing, yes, being mindful of. There was a stance apart from the experience.

I was seeing it clearly. But then I thought, well, what do I do about this? Because there's no instruction, at least that I remember, in the sutta that says, okay, these are the four ways, now do this, this, and this, and you'll be free of them. I had no idea. I saw it clearly, but I had no idea what to do.

So I just started playing, which is my wont on retreat.

I really like to play with my mind. So I just said to myself, "Joseph, stop conceiving." That's all I could think of to do, since it was this conceiving of being apart from. "Joseph, just stop conceiving."

And then quite amazingly—this was completely out of the blue and unexpected—for a very brief period of time, maybe ten or twenty seconds, not long, all that sense of I am-ness completely fell away. There was no residue of I or self in that brief period of time.

Then I thought, well, am I just making all this up? But it turned out to be replicable. Periodically I would say, "Joseph, just stop conceiving," and again, for ten seconds, fifteen seconds, it all fell away. There was no sense of anyone there at all.

This experience reminded me of the famous Bahiya Sutta, which I also mentioned in the article: "In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, just the heard. In the sensed, just the sensed. In the thought, just the thought." The sutta goes on, but the person to whom the Buddha was giving this teaching heard it and became fully enlightened, because this sutta gets to the heart of non-self. In the seen, just the seen—just what is seen, just what is heard, just what is sensed, just what is thought.

The second part of the sutta says, "When for you there is only the seen, and so forth, then there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, then there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

For me, this was such an unexpected experience. It revealed a new level of understanding what non-self means. It goes beyond uprooting the view of self—even the deep realization of that, the uprooting of that identity view as the frame for how we experience life. It went beyond that to not having any sense at all of I am. There's no you there, there's no you here, there's no you in between.

I'm going to add a little side note here. One time I was in India with my teacher Munindraji, and he gave a three-hour talk on twenty-one kinds of silence. So I've been very conscious of time ever since then. I hope you're doing okay for another five or ten minutes.

Talking about that experience, when even the conceit of I am completely falls away—just for those short periods of time, but it was a glimpse, a taste of what that is—I want to give two examples of why I felt this to be so radical in terms of what the Buddha is really teaching.

In one sutta, the Buddha is talking about the five aggregates as being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self. He goes through the physical elements, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, consciousness—referring to these five aggregates, which is really the totality of our experience. He said, "Whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

Now, abandonment here doesn't refer to abandoning the aggregates. It's referring to abandoning the clinging and attachment to the aggregates. But then he gave an example of what that would mean, and the example to me is startling and radical.

He said, "Suppose people were to carry off the grass, sticks, branches, and foliage in this grove, or to burn them, or to do with them as they wish. Would you think, 'People are carrying us off, or burning us, or doing with us what they wish'?" And they replied, "No, Venerable Sir." "For what reason?" "Because the branches, the foliage, the sticks—that is neither self nor what belongs to self."

Then, referring back to the aggregates: "So whatever is not yours, abandon it." He had been teaching that the aggregates do not belong to anyone.

They're empty of self. There's no self contained in them or within them. Whatever is not yours, abandon it—again, abandon attachment. When you have abandoned it, it will lead to your happiness and welfare.

The reason this image sticks in my mind so powerfully is that even after identity view is uprooted, even with the understanding that there's no self, if people were to burn me or carry off my legs or my arms, I would probably be a little reactive. But the Buddha is giving the example for somebody who is fully realized—they would not be taking any of that to be self, as self.

There are different stories in the texts where the Buddha describes past lives. In one, he was a hermit, and a jealous king saw him teaching the queens. The king became angry and ordered his soldiers to cut off the arms and legs of this hermit. As the Buddha tells the story, even then, he felt no aversion, wishing only for their welfare and happiness. Okay, I think there's a little more work to do here.

So that's one example of why this seems so radical to me. And I want to emphasize one point: it also means, or includes, non-attachment to and non-identification with consciousness. We often forget that piece. We think, okay, I can really let go of attachment to the body, to thoughts, to emotions, perhaps for some periods of time. But we still subtly identify with the one who's knowing it all. Consciousness very often becomes the last holdout of this sense of self, because it's very hard to see.

One other example of how this experience felt to me—an image that came to mind afterwards, which perhaps highlights just how mind-blowing this understanding is. I wish I knew another name for "radical," because it really is such a profound shift.

The example that came to my mind was of a character in a movie. The movie is telling some story, and there's this character engaging with everybody else. Then at a certain point, he or she—the character—understands or experiences that all they are is pixels of light. That's all that's really happening. Pixels of light not belonging to anyone. And it's not that the character is aware that it's pixels of light. The character has disappeared. The character is no longer there. It's just the reality of what is actually happening.

Does that strike you? I find that a totally amazing understanding of what our practice is about and where it's leading.

Of course, a very big question remains for us along the path, even just conceptually, or if we've had brief glimpses of what this means—real experiences where the character is no longer there, where it's just the mental and physical elements playing out, analogous to pixels of light. No one there.

So the very important question remains: how do we integrate these two levels? The level of no one there, and the level of being the character, living our lives, engaged in conventional reality—which is where we spend most of our time. It's really important to explore what we do with this understanding, with this insight, in terms of how we live our lives.

One way of understanding this integration is contained in the teaching on the two truths: relative truth and more ultimate truth. Relative truth is simply our conventional way of being. There is a sense of self, and we engage—I'm here, you're there—just our ordinary lives at the relative level of truth. The more ultimate level of truth, and this could be parsed in many different ways, but one way of understanding it: more ultimate truth is the level of pixels, just the rise and fall of the aggregates moment after moment, where there really is the felt experience of no one there.

This integration was expressed beautifully by one Tibetan teacher when someone asked him, "Is the self real?" He said, "Yes, the self is real, but not really real. You exaggerate it."

I think that captures it. The self is real in the sense of how we live our lives, engaged on this relative level, but it's not really real. When we understand that from the more ultimate level, then we can engage on the relative level with much greater freedom, with much less attachment, with much less clinging. We begin to live with more spontaneity, with more ease.

The question that still remains in my mind: what will it be like when it's more than just glimpses? These were ten seconds, twenty seconds, really brief. What will it be like when the mind is fully awakened and it's not just glimpses? I realize that remains to be seen. But it's a real inspiration, continuing on the path.

Thank you for your kind attention. I didn't go three hours.

*After a break for discussion*

**Norman Fischer:** I really loved this, Joseph. I have something to say because I just said this to you—it was very inspiring and illuminating the way you described with some precision moments that came to you, unexpected as they do. This is lovely to hear. And I appreciate very much the granularity, the precision with which you describe these things.

I feel that's something good to learn as a practitioner—that it is very liberating to see the pixels and not get lost in the whole. And in that way, as you suggested, to actually get the wholeness that also includes oneself. So yes, it was very inspiring.

We share a love, I think several of us, for Chinul. I was telling Joseph I taught with Robert Buswell decades ago at Stanford and learned about Chinul then. He has really stayed in my heart since then.

I also really appreciate the way you are showing different echelons, different dimensions of the path that can look very different indeed. Dzogchen looks very different. It's very shocking to be a sutra practitioner, even in the Mahayana, for a long time and then hear, "Oh, you know, you have a moment of rigpa and that's the realization of emptiness." And we're taught, "No, that takes three countless eons. Don't get ahead of yourself."

So these have been koans and riddles for me for a long time, and I think it's worth reflecting on how that could possibly be. Either way, if you get stuck on either notion as being the only option, you're definitely going to be in trouble, because the world of awakening is way more wide open than that. I feel you have suggested that, and I really appreciate it. And also, my first time hearing a talk by Joseph Goldstein—so, big day. Thank you.

*_Guo Gu:_* Thank you so much, Joseph. Of course I appreciate your talk, but I appreciate more your selfless presence, your humility. So thank you.

There are several points I want to touch on. Since we're on Chinul—Chinul got it from Zongmi. Zongmi, this Chinese master from the eighth century, elaborated on these different variations of sudden and gradual. He was both a Chan master and a Huayan master. So he elaborated: gradual practice, sudden awakening; sudden awakening, gradual practice; gradual practice, gradual awakening; sudden practice, sudden awakening—different calibers of beings. So it's a delight to hear you cite Chinul.

Some of the other points: in the Chan tradition, the glimpse of no-self awakening—it's not the uprooting of the identification of the self. It's way down the preliminary stages. So I think the terminology... a lot of people use these terms, but there's more to explore in that.

And for the seeing one's self-nature, which is none other than the selfless state—even though the language may be phrased as "seeing Buddha nature," Buddha nature is the nature of emptiness. It's not self.

For the Chan tradition, a person may be in that state—a glimpse—or may be in it for days, weeks, months. And it's important to understand that the practice is definitely not finished. Definitely. It's important to continue the practice, because at that point, it becomes very clear when self is present. Once a person has the experience of no self, it becomes very clear what selfing is.

Sometimes I use the analogy of cleaning windows. A person can polish the window so it's spick and span. Even birds may not know the window is there—they might fly right through it. But the difference between window and having no window at all is completely different. It's like night and day.

Any subtle reification, any selfing—the four ways of identifying with experience—it's like a thorn poking at you. Now, of course, depending on the depth of the experience, if a person has a shallow experience, then it's possible to take the window as a thing. But

for a person who has had—I'm going to just use the word experience even though that's problematic—no window, for them to fall back and start taking windows and taking "spick and span" as something... it's just stupid, silly.

And that transition, that shifting, the person needs to experience this again and again and again. Not in a seeking way, but in a natural way. There are methods in the Chan tradition to cultivate this, because cultivation continues. Most of the Chan teachings bring the person from a scattered state to concentrated, from concentrated to unified, from unified to the initial breakthrough. But there are approaches that continue after that, post-awakening.

And it's like what you have shared so intimately. It's these moments of unpredictability, unanticipated. Sometimes a person will slip into it. Sometimes it's like a breakthrough. And sometimes, even in dream, one can slip into it. Because the fact of windowness and no window at all is so radically different, these differences are readily apparent.

Another thing about Majjhima Nikaya 1, the sutta that you mentioned—the quick way that the Chan tradition identifies those fourfold problematic ways that we relate to everything, the shortcut approach to identifying the problem, is self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is like the raw, fundamental expression of grasping.

And this was in your booklet, your article about mindfulness. I feel this is a point that we can also explore. Because most people can't distinguish between mindfulness and self-consciousness. In other words, they take whatever object of meditation as the fourth one—as mind. So they're watching themselves washing dishes, watching themselves walking, watching themselves. Or they're a bystander—the third one—apart from it, some kind of witnessing. All of that is just self-consciousness.

And same with the first two, which are subtle forms of identification: with it, and in the midst of it. So the first two are subtle, the latter two are kind of coarse. This may be something we can all explore to clarify: What is the popular term mindfulness? How does one actually engage in it?

So the Chan approach—one of the Chan approaches—is not allowing practitioners to have anything to abide in, to hold on to, to objectify. Because that's our tendency. We make everything into a thing. And once we make it into a thing, we're through.

That's why in one of the early suttas—Malunkya or Mulaka, I don't know which one—the Buddha says, once you experience the thing, if you experience the object of your meditation... I forget what the object was that he said, but if you experience it, that's not

mindfulness. This is very radical. I think most people may not notice because I'm supposed to experience my breath, when I walk. But he says when you experience it, that's not mindfulness—you're already off, that's not it.

So what he's saying is, again, this is a facet of self-consciousness: making everything into a thing. The Chan approach, one way, is to engage in what I call the practice of wonderment—which is not a thing. It's a question that generates a particular feeling tone. And the feeling tone is grounded in the sense of not knowing.

But you cannot use your thinking mind, you cannot reify it into a thing, because that's making it into a thing. So one is just left in this kind of non-conceptual state, yet wakeful, receptive. And that is one way to answer your question.

---

I would just like to respond to clarify a point that you highlighted, which is that the description of that experience I mentioned at the end was not what I was referring to as the uprooting of the view of self. That uprooting function was not about what I described. Rather, the uprooting function happens in the experience of the unborn. And the experience of the unborn is very different than what I was describing as glimpses of a mind free of "I am."

So it was very clear that that was not the unborn or a nirvanic experience, because it's that one which, just as you said, is the radical uprooting. And interestingly enough, I'm glad you brought it up—one of the examples I've used in my teaching is the difference between a clear window and no window. That distinction is critical. And it's the experience of the unborn which is the no window. So what I was describing at the end was a different experience than that. I just wanted to clarify the two different levels.

---

Could you clarify that exactly? In other words, how does that experience of no "I am" relate to the experience of the unborn? Is it a step toward it in some sense? Are they totally unrelated?

---

I'm trying to find the right frame for the response. So that moment of the unborn, of that experience—that's the first glimpse of nirvana in the understanding of it in early Buddhism. That is the radical break. And I think that's what you were referring to. Everything is different from that point because we've gone beyond this whole mind-

body process. And so that view of self, it just doesn't make any sense at all. One has experienced something beyond that, namely the unborn, non-manifest, non-occurring. That's the powerful moment.

But as I said, and we all know, there are many defilements which still remain, including the conceit "I am." So what I was describing at the end was more a deeper dive into that. But that's very different than that moment of uprooting. And the conceit "I am," the reason it was so momentary, you know, a short period, is because that level of experience did not uproot conceit. Because that level was not going beyond. It was still all of this, but seen free of the "I am-ing." But it's still—that was not a transcendent experience. That was like a deeper understanding of this.

Whereas the moment of the unborn, that's transcendent. Beyond this. That's beyond this. And that's why it's so powerful and has that uprooting function. And that is the difference between having the mind really still and clear and all that—the clean window—and no window at all.

---

If I may, I just want to comment a little bit and start by saying, Joseph, I really, really appreciate your talk. This is maybe the third talk that I've heard of yours, and I resonated so much with what you said. I appreciate also the sense of humor that you brought to it, and the introspection and intimacy.

But to John's question, maybe this: The constructed phenomena is what is being seen as experience. So if we want to see that clearly as a clean window, then those are the Bahiya moments where the observer merges with the phenomena, or that's what it feels like. Actually, it's more like the observer falls off, and the mere knowing is the thing. There's no separation between subject and object, and there's no one observing object. That's a conventional way that we talk about in early Buddhism. We do talk about subject and object, but that's a conventional way that can fall away very clearly. And that is still looking, though, at constructed phenomena.

But constructed phenomena, no matter how clear the window is, is ceasing. It's ceasing entirely.

And I really—you all will see that my talk tomorrow is going to dovetail very nicely with what Joseph said. But just to say, the connection is that by our ability to, with precision—even "allowing" is too much—but to be present for the cessation of one experience without picking up the next experience, then there is where what Joseph is calling the unborn, or nibbāna, or the unconstructed, the non-experience, is apparent. And then another moment of experience arises and takes that as the object, and that's

where we see very different understandings of what happened there, or how it's described, or how it was known. But it is for that reason—for the reason of cessation—that by studying the self, we can know what is the non-self, what is the unborn.

I wanted to say also, just leading on from that, or perhaps moving on a little bit, I really appreciated how you spoke about māna and seeing māna and knowing māna as also mere experience, mere phenomena. Phenomena rolling on, as we like to say. And it reminded me of a framework that I like to share with folks. If all things go as planned, I will be back here in January to teach about this. Sometimes I call it "three-layer cake," but actually it's more like three facets of the jewel, or three different forms of investigation of any particular kind of experience.

One being the content—when we talk about taints, or tendencies, or wholesome and unwholesome qualities. There's the content view, which is super important. Without actually doing that part of the work, that's called spiritual bypassing. So that's a very important aspect of practice.

But then there's another perspective, potentially, on any given experience, which is this process perspective that the five aggregates is really talking about. Contact happens, and it spins off certain aspects of mind that we can observe—responses, reactions to that, and so on. And that is one way of arriving at that more dry-eyed view of, yes, even deluded thought is just that. It is just that process unfolding moment after moment after moment.

And then the third view, which is one that the Buddha brings up very specifically on the night of his enlightenment, is the specific conditionality—getting even deeper into what can be known as present.

So to the question of whether there really is a self, my answer would be: well, is there really a mirage, or is there really a shadow? Go find out. Have a look. There is such a phenomenon, and yet it is a mirage.

**Another teacher:** Yes, indeed. That's what I really like. It's real, but not really real. So I think that's what you're pointing to.

I wanted to respond to John's question about the difference between a glimpse versus the unborn, the deathless. From the Chan perspective, it's not that they're wholly separate. It's more like different shades, different gradations. It's like getting a few drops of water in your mouth. Did you taste water? Yeah, you actually did taste water. But did that have any transformative effect? Pretty much none. In fact, the person can turn around, take that experience as a thing, and be very proud of it. So now it becomes another object of attachment.

But the water or the wetness is in line—you could say, in accordance. So the issue is, beyond these glimpses, to be in the experience and actually engage in the complexity of life. That's where one sees the functioning of the wisdom for selfless function, which is just compassion. So that's why the practice needs to continue, again and again, so that these experiences will deepen.

The analogy I have is like a piece of paper. You poke a hole through it. Is there a hole? Yeah, there's a hole. But basically, you can still use the paper to write. You can do anything with the paper. It's still pretty much intact. Versus you start to poke it with a finger, or you just shred the paper. Now that paper becomes useless. But these little holes—you keep poking, keep poking.

So the litmus test would be the transformation in relation to—

In behavior, I guess. Behavior in relation to greed and aversion. The fundamental poisons.

*Thank you. Thank you very much, both of you.*

---

**Audience Discussion*

*Anyone have a question they want to ask? Or comment. Yes, comment, correction, admonishment—no, that's welcome.*

---

As I've been listening—for me, I've been practicing in the Theravāda tradition, reading the little booklet, and now listening to the different viewpoints. There's an understanding of the difference between, let's say, the two traditions. But experientially, I found myself listening to Guo Gu just now, nodding yes, yes. And so experientially, they do not feel separate.

It's like the self-view dropping away and then those flashes of nothing. It feels like what's been described as the obscurations disappearing. The seeing gets clearer, clearer, clearer. The obscurations disappear. There's no separation. So it feels very much like what's described in the other traditions—that unity and no separation, just function.

And with that, it's connected again to: if you look into that, there's no clinging, because who would cling and what would they cling to? I'm finding that experiences that sound like what's described over here are totally connected with what's described over

there. And ultimately, the gradual cultivation is that with more clear seeing, more dropping away of separation, there's the dissipation of desire and aversion, and then it's love, kindness, compassion. That's it.

You've mentioned several times that these differences are really important, so I'm wondering about that. How to practice with that sense of—are they really different? I mean, I know they are, but... are they really different? Are they *really, really* different? Ultimately, it's all passing experience anyway.

---

I'll take a stab at this. Tell me if I'm misrepresenting the later traditions, but it seems to me the bottom line of any practice is: have the defilements been uprooted or not? It doesn't matter the technique or the method—if that's the result, then it's serving the purpose of coming to the end of suffering. Because when the Buddha was asked what he taught, very often his response was really simple: he teaches suffering and the end of suffering. That's what all our practice is about.

Ending suffering in ourselves and helping others with that—this is what our practice is about. What is the cause of suffering in our lives? It's the defilements in the mind. And I think there are different approaches and different methods. One is—well, I think they all share—seeing that the defilements themselves are empty of self. But that seeing is still not the same as uprooting them. And so that's why I say whatever method, whether it's Zen or Tibetan, that seems to me the critical point.

The only thing I would add is something that's already come up, which is—and I can even say this from personal experience—one can fool oneself about what one has realized. So in some ways the touchstone is also: have things actually changed? Especially my behavior. I can even fool myself about having fewer kleshas. "Oh, I've got fewer obscurations. I'm less angry, less attached." And then someone cuts me off in traffic and I'm like... So I do feel like that's the touchstone. And as you said, in life, out there, if that behavior hasn't changed, then all the talk about removing defilements is just talk.

I think probably if we can go to essence—maybe two questions, maybe one. We want to leave time for a practice. Is there another question or comment?

"The Buddha spoke of suffering and the end of suffering. I find myself wondering if there is actually an endgame. You described subtler and subtler levels of attachment to all these different domains. Who's to say that even the cattle in that Strong Heard story, that power across the fjord, who's to say that a day or so later, māna is not going to show up in that person? And then, if one actually uproots all the defilements, how does one know? What's the measure? It seems a little bit qualitative."

So I'd like to ask you a question. If you put your hand in fire, do you know that it burns?

"Sure."

Do you have any doubt about it?

"None."

In the genuine experience of things being uprooted, there is that quality of certainty. And it's very different than saying, "Yeah, it looks to me like the defilements are uprooted and I don't see them anymore." That's on a whole different level. That's just personal perception of how our mind might be. The experience that results in the uprooting of the defilements—which is the experience of Nibbāna, or the unborn, or whatever word you like—it has that same immediacy and certainty as putting your hand in fire and knowing it burns.

That's why one of the defilements uprooted at that first glimpse, in addition to uprooting the view of self, is doubt. Because it's exactly like that. You know from experience the zero center. That's very different than having various experiences and then misinterpreting them or clinging to them.

So again, I would just suggest two things. One, don't believe me. And two, as we continue our practice and each of us has different levels of these kinds of experiences, then we know for ourselves. We know whether it's like putting your hand in fire or not, because we've had the experience. So it's not a question of taking any of what's said as dogma. Take it as an invitation to explore, not to believe. And I think that's really important—that we find out for ourselves the meaning and implications and experience of these various experiences.

In order to leave enough time, should we do one more question? I think not, because the meditation needs a little introduction. So let's transition now. Thank you very much. Thanks to everyone for their comments, and to our teachers also. We'll move to a practice now.

This is a meditation that I actually have not taught quite in this way before, so you are all the guinea pigs, and you can let me know afterwards how it goes.

You may remember in the booklet I described briefly how the language we use to describe things very much conditions how we experience things. The language we usually use describing our experience in the world is in the active voice: "I'm hearing a sound"—subject, verb, object. This is our usual grammatical framework for how we language our experience.

What I found to be extremely interesting and freeing in meditation is to reframe the experience—the language of it—in the passive voice. So, for example, instead of "I'm knowing a sound," it becomes "a sound being known," "a thought being known," "a sensation being known." In this grammatical construction, the "I" has disappeared. The "I" is no longer the subject.

When we frame our experience to ourselves in this way, I found it's a very simple and immediate way of touching into the selfless nature of experience. It's very immediate.

If I can go out on a limb, in this way of experiencing—which is really a way of practicing that Bāhiya Sutta, "in the seen just the seen, in the heard just the heard," not "I'm seeing, I'm hearing, I'm thinking"—a sound being known, a thought being known, a sensation being known, no one there, things are known immediately, exactly, precisely, not a moment before, not a moment after. Going out on a limb, this might be one way of experiencing what later traditions called the non-dual.

So this is what I'd like to have us do in the meditation. I'll guide it a little bit, but just keep in mind the general frame is holding the question silently—although I'll guide it a little bit—in any moment: what's being known? Just what's being known, moment after moment. There's nothing to do. Everything is arising by itself. There's nothing to do, not interfering in any way. It's just letting phenomena unfold. And moment after moment, what is it that's being known?

Does this sound clear to you? Okay, let's just try and see what it's like.

Settle into a meditative posture, and at first just open to sounds being known. Nothing to do. Sounds are appearing by themselves and being known spontaneously. Really relax into it. It's completely relaxing and open. Just: sound is being known. No one doing anything. It's like listening to music—not interfering, not manipulating. It's all happening by itself.

Then begin to be aware of the sensations of the breath being known in exactly the same way sounds are being known. Really relax into the natural flow of the breath. Let it come and go just as it is. Don't try to manipulate or change or pull the next one in.

Very relaxed, very open. The sensations of the breath are appearing spontaneously in the same way that sounds were appearing. Allow for the breath to unfold in whatever way it does. Trust that your body knows how to breathe.

Be aware of sounds being known now, sensations of the breath being known, and no one is doing anything. Watch out for trying to do something. It's all happening by itself. And if you notice a kind of trying or a little bit of efforting, then it's simply trying being known, or efforting being known. It's completely simple.

Maybe other sensations in the body are appearing and being known. Some may be pleasant, unpleasant.

Simply let them be known. It's all happening by itself.

Be aware of the tendency sometimes to pull the next in-breath in after an out-breath. You kind of initiate it or pull it in. That's just the self getting involved. The breath will come and go in its own time, in its own way. It's simply sensations being known.

In the flow of phenomena, thoughts or images may appear. Simply a thought being known, or an image being known, or an emotion being known. You can let the mind become very open and choiceless—just sitting with what's being known moment after moment, without any directing towards anything in particular. Simply settled back, moment after moment, with what's being known.

And if you feel like you're losing that sense of relaxation, go back to simply being aware of sounds being known. That's so easy.

In these last few minutes, consider this koan: known by what? Is there anything you can find? Things are clearly being known, but known by what?

There's nothing to find. And the not finding *is* the finding. The empty nature of knowing. There's nothing to find, and still the knowing is happening. No one there doing anything.

Sound being known.

Anticipation of lunch being known.

CHAPTER 80

# Closing Session

Joseph Goldstein · 2h22

> *This closing session of the Liberation dialogue brings together Joseph Goldstein, Anne Klein, John Dunne, and Guo Gu for final reflections on integrating practice with daily life. Joseph offers three practical teachings: deepening the precept of non-harming to include even the smallest beings (illustrated by his friendship with stink bugs), practicing the question 'How can I help?' as an expression of bodhicitta until it becomes natural, and turbocharging generosity by acting immediately on generous impulses without second-guessing.*
>
> *Joseph also explores working skillfully with māna (conceit), particularly the comparing mind that constantly reinforces the sense of 'I am.' He notes that even spiritual aspirations can subtly reinforce self-view when we imagine an 'I' who will attain awakened states. Anne reflects on equanimity as freedom from reactivity—like a sage serving all guests equally at a feast—connecting it to the wisdom of sameness in Mahāyāna traditions. She emphasizes that devotion takes many forms, including committed action, and that taking joy in one's practice brings energy without pride.*
>
> *Guo Gu shares a formative teaching from his master—'body like a rag, mind like a mirror'—and how volunteering for unwanted tasks became his bodhicitta practice. He advocates for deeper contextual understanding when learning across traditions, and emphasizes the importance of making Chinese Buddhist resources available for Western Buddhism's development. The session concludes with William Edelglass raising questions about Buddhist practice and democracy, drawing on B.R. Ambedkar's vision of social democracy rooted in mettā, karuṇā, and paññā as democratic virtues essential for engaging our current political moment.*

Good morning, friends.

So as Joseph mentioned, there's a Sariputta relic in the stupa. One of the stories I think of with Sariputta is from the Vimalakirti Nirdesha Sutra, in which a goddess is illustrating why any thoughts of gender hierarchy are absurd. She takes on the male form of Sariputta and puts Sariputta in a female form.

You may notice that Dhammadipa is not here—but that is not what has happened in this context. Dhammadipa needed to head home early this morning, and she sends her love and gratitude to everyone. That was always planned, though I had intended to say something about it.

So this morning, we're going to have some sitting. Our theme for the morning is reflections on everything that we've been talking about so far the last few days—and how that engages the world. What does it mean for us to be thinking about these ideas, reflecting on these ideas, practicing our own individual lineage in the world that we live in? What is our place in that world, and what can we offer?

One of the things that I've been thinking a lot about is the decline in the humanities as an object of study, the decline in jobs in religious studies. I think of my colleagues up here—Gwagu, John, and Anne—all of whom have PhDs in Buddhist studies. One of the things that enabled them to become who they are was, yes, having this deep Dharma training, but also having an intellectual academic training that is mutually supportive of that.

When I look out at the landscape of higher education, yes, there are still people being trained in religious studies, but there are far fewer jobs available. So the people who had the aspirations that many scholars of a certain age had decades ago—many of them do not have the possibility of devoting their life to teaching students and to deepening their study and practice.

I think of this because one of the things I reflect on is the importance of institutions in forming all of us as teachers or as practitioners. The books we read on Buddhism were published by institutions. They were written by authors who were trained by institutions. Yes, today many teachers have become very well-known and can be thought of as perhaps independent of institutions. But I think of Joseph here, who has devoted his life to fostering and sustaining institutions, including this one at BCBS. Joseph is a founder of this institution, was on our board for thirty years, and is still an emeritus member of our board.

I think of BCBS as an institution that doesn't do exactly what the academic institutions do. We don't train people to that depth in the same way. But we do offer something different as an institution. We offer something I think is fairly unique: integrating study—some of you have done multi-month, year-long programs with us—and practice. For us, study is a form of practice, but we always want there to be a meditative dimension that integrates and is informed by that study. And also, as we've done here and try to do in our programs, we foster a sense of spiritual friendship that binds together the practice and the study.

So it's not exactly what is being lost with the loss of teachers of religious studies. But I do think there's something important about what we do as an institution. And this is my dana talk: these teachers will be getting an honorarium, but basically, to support our mission that Joseph formulated early on, they are offering their dana to BCBS to

sustain the integration of study and practice—and a very particular kind of community, a kind of community that is what we think of as spiritual friendship, supportive of the way in which we want to take our practice out into the world.

You will be receiving an email with links for a survey. This is the first time we've done anything quite like this, and I think we're really interested—for those of you who are on Zoom and in the room—in how this lands for you. What was this like for you? Should we do something like this again? We think of that survey as a form of dana also, as a form of giving, because it is deeply helpful to us to know what your experience is and how we can support your integration of study, practice, and spiritual friendship.

For those of you who are in the Dharma Hall, there's a dana box out in the foyer. Maybe that's enough for now. Let's share some silence together.

---

So this morning I'd like to talk about a few things that have really been a key part of my living the practice in the world. Maybe you'll find some of them helpful.

The first has to do with the precepts. Obviously, being committed to following the precepts is fundamental to all Buddhist paths. I wanted to emphasize this morning one particular precept, which I've seen evolve in myself even through my last retreat, just this winter.

It was a different dimension. And that is the precept not to kill.

On one level, of course, we're probably not going around killing other people. But as we go down the hierarchy of size, sometimes that precept gets a little wobbly. Especially now in the springtime in New England, a lot of little insects start coming out and maybe are co-habiting with us. It's not uncommon, even for people who have been practicing a long time—somehow there's some unwanted insect in the house, and we spray it, just kill it in some unthinking way, not thinking it means that much because it's very small.

But killing any being—it's a being. Someone mentioned, maybe it was Anne, just watching these little ants avoiding danger as they scurry around. Clearly they want to continue living. So if we can just practice a greater sensitivity to that, when possible, instead of killing, just remove them, take them outside.

This last winter during my self-retreat, and this is part of a new sutta that you probably haven't come across yet—it's called the Stink Bug Sutra. Now, for those of you who don't know about stink bugs, they actually don't stink unless you step on them, so they're pretty benign most of the time. But in the wintertime, at least here, they come

into the house a lot. This provided a dilemma, because I knew if I put them outside in the freezing cold, that would probably kill them. So I started putting them in a big potted plant, just in the dirt—out of sight, out of mind.

But this winter, I took a big step forward in my following of this precept. I saw these stink bugs just basking in the sun on the windowsill, and I really became friends with them. When I saw them there, I started feeling a certain kind of happiness that they were just there sunning themselves. I'm not sure I would call it love, but it was definitely an upwelling of feeling—connection and kindness. It quite surprised me that instead of even thinking I wanted to get them out of sight, it was fine. They were these cute little stink bugs sitting on my windowsill.

All of this is to say that we can take the precept of not killing in its basic form, but it can actually morph into some feeling of metta, some feeling of kindness. So I just offer that to you. You might want to memorize this sutra.

The second thing that has really been impactful in a big way actually comes from the title of a book written by Paul Gorman and Ram Dass, back in the seventies. The title of the book was *How Can I Help?* It's a beautiful book—just short stories of people offering help in many different contexts. But I love the title. It has almost become a mantra, something I've really practiced, and now it's quite natural having practiced this for many years. It becomes integrated into our way of being and thinking and feeling as we navigate the world—the bottom line of how we are in the world. Just having that intention.

In any situation, if we reflect on it and practice it, it becomes a natural response. We're not thinking, "Oh, well, how can I help?" It just becomes natural. And it can be really small things. Somebody asks us to do something, and maybe we don't particularly feel like doing it, but—how can I help? It gives us the energy, the motivation to extend ourselves a little bit. And sometimes it brings a tremendous amount of joy, just as we're relating to other people, to life, to situations with that basic motivation, when that basic motivation has become part of us.

I found this tremendously rewarding, and it really stemmed from the teachings on bodhicitta. When I heard those teachings, they impacted me deeply—the motivation to practice for the benefit of all. This became an expression of that, a practice of that, rather than simply something I was repeating in my mind. I would suggest, if it inspires you at all, to reflect on that and see if it can become the basic way of relating to people, to the world, to situations. Sometimes there are situations when we can't help, but very often we can, even in some small way.

This has been important for me, really life-transforming as a practice. At a certain point, it becomes natural. It's not even something we have to remind ourselves of—it just becomes the way we respond.

One way I've found of doing that, another practice which brings a tremendous amount of joy and has been hugely interesting and impactful, is a certain practice of generosity—one expression of "how can I help." The particular practice I've been doing for a long time now is this: if I have the thought to give something, I act on it. Because I noticed that very often I would have a generous thought, and it would come and go, and I wouldn't do anything about it.

Or the thought would come and I'd second-guess myself. "Oh, should I? Should I? Is it too much? I don't know. Maybe they don't need it." Just all the hesitation in the mind about generosity.

So having the intention to really practice—if the thought comes, do it—has been amazing. And it's not even looking, in this particular practice, for opportunities to be generous. It's just paying attention to one's own thoughts, and if the thought arises quite spontaneously, act on it.

What's been really surprising to me is sometimes it's about really little things—making a phone call, something very small. And sometimes the thought comes of something really big. Often the first thought in my mind after that is, "Whoa, really?" But having made that commitment to this practice, I do it anyway. And I have never regretted any expression of this. I just find it's a beautiful practice—beautiful for me, helpful for the recipient.

So it's a way of turbocharging our practice of generosity. It gives it a lot of energy that comes up in the most unexpected times, because we don't know when these thoughts are going to arise. But they do, especially for people committed to dharma practice. So if the thought arises, do it.

Okay—getting to love stink bugs, "How can I help?", practicing acting on thoughts of generosity. I could go on and on about many different things, but for the last one, which is now on a more meditative level, I've also found this really interesting: actively working with becoming mindful of *māna*, of conceit, when it arises.

Because as we've talked about, it's there until we're fully awakened. So it is going to be around, and we want to become friends—or at least friendly—with it, because often the tendency is we see it and then we start judging ourselves. "I'm such a terrible person, look at all this māna, all this conceit." But rather, if we can just—as I mentioned the other day—take a certain delight in the fact that we're seeing it and take interest in it,

understanding its selfless nature, then we're not beating ourselves over the head with it. "Oh, māna." And then seeing that it is selfless, even though it's constellated around the feeling and thought of "I am." But that "I am" itself is selfless.

Just a couple of particular aspects of conceit that you might want to pay attention to. The most common one, which can come up so often, is any level of that comparing mind—comparing ourselves with others. I think you would be amazed how often that arises in the mind and how deeply it conditions our way of being. Just comparing ourselves with others, sometimes with a competitive edge, sometimes not particularly competitive, but just some kind of comparing. Even if it's quite benign, the comparing itself is reinforcing the sense of "I am."

So it might be interesting to keep an eye out for this when you're engaged in the immediacy of a relationship with somebody. You're having a conversation—it could be somebody you know really well, it could be somebody you've never met before—and just notice, in the course of that, is there any kind of undercurrent of comparing going on? Or "I could have said that better." It could be anything. I'm sure you're aware of the fact that this happens. What I'm suggesting is highlighting it. As you go through the day, keep an eye out for it.

Because when we're lost in it, when we're not mindful of it, it just doesn't feel good, even though we're doing it. It's a downer. But if we are mindful of it in the way I suggested—just taking delight, "Oh yeah, there's māna, I see you"—it really is uplifting.

So that's one aspect of māna. The last aspect of it, which is really related to everything we've been discussing here this week, and I think is more subtle—

But as we talk about all the wonderful experiences that can happen as we undertake these various practices—and sometimes they're described with the bliss and the wonder and the light and the joy that can come from our practice—it's so easy and common to think, "Oh yeah, I want that. I want to be in this experience. I want to have this experience of joy and happiness."

And on one level that's fine. It does motivate us. But keep an eye out for the reinforcement of the "I am" in that, where we're overlooking or not paying enough attention to the non-self aspect of it all. This is getting to quite a deep level of Dharma understanding. On a relative level and a conventional level, of course we can use that sense of "I want this," and it can be done with a skillful state of mind. It inspires us to practice. But watch out for the idea that there will be an "I am" in the fruition of these states.

Is this making sense? This is quite a subtle aspect of how we undertake the practice. And as a reminder, that "I am" is going to be there. We shouldn't judge ourselves when we see this aspect of it. It is going to be there. But can we see it? And in the moment of seeing it, just reminding ourselves that the whole practice is to free ourselves from the "I am-ness."

So that's really the main things I wanted to say. In recent years in my practice and when I'm on retreat, I have found this exploration of mana to be exceedingly interesting and pushing the edge of my practice, because that is so deeply rooted. When I'm really playing with how it's created—both in daily life and in my meditation—it really feels that I'm at the forward edge of my understanding, and that's an exciting place to be in the practice. It's really interesting. So you can play with any or all of these that might inspire you.

---

Good morning, everyone. I woke this morning reflecting on what we would say at the end of the retreat, and one phrase that came to me—not unrelated to "how can I help"—was: How can I bring my practice into the world? How can I take it with me everywhere I go? We all know that that's a challenge; we get caught up in things. And it occurs to me that this has something to do with our love for our practice, our devotion to our practice.

When we practice bodhicitta—in, for example, the four boundless states, the brahmaviharas, which are shared by all Indian traditions, the non-Buddhist ones as well, and certainly all the forms of Buddhism—we start with equanimity. Theravada often ends with equanimity. And this equanimity is a freedom from reactivity, the very thing that puts a block in the heart, that obstructs love or even just a relaxed kind of good feeling. Because all the things we just heard—we're competitive, we have concerns on our mind, we have an "I am" flowing through everything—that doesn't make us equanimous. That makes us reactive. So equanimity is a great thing.

In Longchenpa and other places, each of the four boundless states is also associated with one of the five Buddha wisdoms, which in the Mahayana is an important way to appreciate what a Buddha is, what kind of wisdom Buddha has. And maybe it's illuminating—it is illuminating for me, even every time I remember this.

So equanimity, the cultivation of an even-mindedness, where you have a sort of unbridled state with respect to other people. You're not pulled into like, dislike, jealousy—all the things that rush up to the mind when we encounter someone. It's a kind of free-

dom in and of itself. To be free from that, or at least a little tempered, that reactivity is a great thing, really a great thing. In modern parlance, we could say it's psychological freedom, or a little more psychological freedom.

And in Mahayana traditions, it is associated with the wisdom of sameness. There's a certain sameness—the stink bug, the cockroaches. You have no idea how big they are in Texas. I still shout when I see one. Harvey can tell how big it is by how loud I shout. But I do take it outside. And after thirty-five years of meeting these beings, I did notice in the last few days I have the very beginning of a—I don't know, affection might be a little strong—but a little something. And definitely I don't wish to harm them. So that's an equanimity test.

The wisdom of sameness. And interestingly enough, the wisdom of the Dharmadhatu, which means reality itself. So this equanimity can be translated as sameness, evenness, because you have an evenness of mind. It's really a powerful thing. And it is, for us, the foundation on which we can cultivate precious bodhicitta.

Azom Drukpa, who was very important in the Longchen tradition in eastern Tibet, died in 1924, just as Tibet was coming into modernity. He was an important figure. He was my teacher's father in his previous life. He had visions of Jigme Lingpa. And at the end of his life, he said that of all the teachers he studied with, the greats of the great of his era, somehow the most important person for him, his teacher, was Jigme Lingpa, whom he met in vision.

Azom Drukpa wrote a commentary on the foundational practices, as I prefer to call them—the so-called preliminary practices, because they do precede everything, but they are a foundation in the way that the foundation of a building is always there. Every time you walk into the Dharma Hall, you are standing on the foundation of this building. It's not preliminary in the sense that you do it and then you're done. A little advertisement for foundational practices.

He talks there, of course, about the four boundless states. And I was remembering this morning, he talks about equanimity meaning to have the mind like a sage who's throwing a banquet. And in throwing this banquet, the sage invites everybody. No discrimination. No good, bad, these people aren't worthy. So be like a sage. Boundless equanimity is said to be like a sage serving guests at a feast. For when sages serve their guests, they serve everyone equally without discriminating between good and bad.

Maybe so. Wisdom comes from this. "I am" thins out from this.

The practice of anything is animated, of course, by compassion, the wish to be more helpful, and by devotion. We talked a bit about it last night, and just one or two words further on that. I remember a moment traveling with my teacher, his sister who is a highly regarded nun, and their cousin who is also a tulku. We were all in an elevator heading to someplace really important as part of his program. We're standing in the elevator and somehow he's forgotten, or somebody's forgotten, something really important that's back in the room. So I pop out of the elevator—it has to be, we have to have it. I pop out, start running down the hall. And he calls out after me. He says, "You have a lot of devotion."

That has really struck me. It was so kind.

I'm sort of not feeling very devoted. I'm feeling agitated. I'm feeling like I've got to get there and get back and get down in the elevator. And that's what I was focused on.

And so maybe it's helpful to say that devotion takes many forms. Some people feel, "Well, I'm not that kind of soft-hearted, gooey-hearted person. I'm not sentimental or something like that." But commitment to one's practice is devotion. Commitment to doing what you all do here to keep this wonderful institution going—that we do want to support—is devotion.

And to take joy in one's own devotion is very important. To take joy in one's practice is very important. My teacher says this all the time, and it's a subtle thing because it's not pride. We're so worried about being prideful that we can't even take delight in our own dharma activities. And that joy brings joy. It brings energy. It lights us up.

One of the things my teacher says—he'll start a dharma talk by saying, "Bring to mind bodhicitta. Bring to mind joy in your practice, because joy lights up your mind." And lucency, as we've talked about, is natural to the mind. We want more of it. We want energy in the mind. So devotion, starting with equanimity, building devotion—all of these are also oriented toward benefiting other beings, giving us energy to benefit other beings.

My theme really is things that seem to bring energy to my practice, and the motivation. In the foundational practices of our tradition, we follow Jigme Lingpa, and our teacher, who's considered an incarnation of Jigme Lingpa, wrote a condensed version. They're the classic things, the parts of foundational practice common to all the traditions.

Precious human life. Realizing how precious our lives are certainly animates us to think of what is best use. What is best use of your life? We all have our limits. We all have our possibilities. Because the next one is: it's impermanent. This precious, this most precious gift, this life—amazing. We've encountered the dharma. Who knows what might happen unless we care for our practice. This precious life is impermanent.

And not only that, with all of our actions, we are engaging in causes for potential suffering. Or in any case, we're perpetuating the cycle of samsara. Somebody in a class I TA'd for a million years ago at University of Virginia—a graduate student unknowingly coined the term "sickly existence." Don and I laughed about that for years. So when we practice, with these four things—we get caught up in afflictions, and we create causes for continuing to engage in sickly existence.

It seems to me that, for me, my kind of more clearly formed aspiration as a way of understanding what I seek to bring out into the world is this idea of being like a sage at a feast, inviting everybody to the feast. And it also occurred to me, as I was thinking about this this morning, that we have had a feast—a kind of dharma feast. In our circle last night, it was very moving how people were feeling moved. And I was also touched by the friendly atmosphere, talking across traditions in this time when talking across lines of any kind is so terribly vexed.

One of the powerful things about the possibility of recognizing—in whatever way we begin to recognize—that our minds are actually empty... They're not like some thing that got put into a plaster form and now takes that shape. But we're so identified with so many forms of "I am," "I am," "I am." And how can we break through this?

Something I have come to think of as a kind of anthem of the Mahayana about buddha nature is a phrase from the All-Creating Majesty, which is a tantra associated with the mind class of Dzogchen.

Our teacher says that when you sing, the blessings come in more quickly, more easily. And we have our own way of saying that neuroscientifically—the right brain and the left brain and everything. So when I translate some of these things, I translate into what I call chantable English, because then we can sing them. And we can sing them to a Tibetan melody, if we wish, because I translate them into the same meter. It's a thing I like to do. It's a little bit like a crossword puzzle—you have to figure it out.

What we're told here is that actually—and I believe I've heard this in Zen a great deal also—if you see the Buddha on the road, kill him. We read that. And from my understanding, this means if you feel that the Buddha is only outside, that's really a problem. That's really wrong. That means you don't understand what a creative potentiality

we have in the human mind. And Longchenpa says, unless we realize this, we won't be sufficiently animated. We need to take this into the world. I could be a Buddha. And so I need to be as mindful of this as I can all the time.

Because this is what it says: Nothing hinders waking more than remaining unaware of what is already there, right there without fuss or frills. And what's hard about that is that we identify with fuss or frills, which means effort. That I am so identified with the part of me that is so obviously not a Buddha that it's really hard. I think that's the big challenge. And so this reminder is important because this "I am" that we know so well and need to know better is not all there is.

There is—this is a mengak, the kind of thing I'm not sure you should share, but it's kind of too precious not to in this moment—these two paired mengak. It's through self that we get to not-self, as you have said. We have to bump into the "I am" in order even to know what we're about in practice. And also, there is some other way of being. *Na mebe na.* The I which is not I. The me-less me. And that is what we pray to realize as we remind ourselves that we can be a Buddha.

---

I'd like to begin with a moment of gratitude, actually. It has been really, for me, in some ways quite a moving experience, a time for growth and learning. And some of this comes from conversations I've been having with Joseph on and off for some time now, actually around some of the issues we've been talking about. And there's something really special—well, there's something special about Joseph as a person and as a practitioner. But also there's something really special about talking across the traditions, and that has been even enhanced much more by being with Anne and Guogu and Dhammadīpa. That really is very moving. And all of this is made possible by this beautiful place, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

But also there's someone I would thank, except he just told me he would be terribly embarrassed by it. But if I were to thank him, I would say that it is tremendously important that there be someone who takes a leadership position, who corrals all of us, herds the cats on occasion, and who actually also holds the space in a beautiful way. So to this unnamed individual, I bow.

And one of the beautiful things about Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is, as an institution, that it's a place where scholarship and practice come together. So this morning, for example, I had a chance to catch my friend Pico Iyer and to talk about his new book that's going to be coming out about the idea of prabhāsvara, or clear light, which is such an important idea. And not just theory, but in practice.

There's a phrase that Dharmakīrti uses, echoing something we find in the earliest texts, that says *prabhāsvaram idaṃ cittaṃ prakṛtyā gantuvo malāḥ* in Sanskrit, which means: this mind by its nature is clear light; the defilements are adventitious. This is pointing to the key, the core actually, of the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions, of these non-dual styles—and I think perhaps also in a certain way Chan as well, though I'll of course leave Guogu to speak of that.

What is that? There are many words we can use for it. It's *rang rig*, *rang sel*—self-knowing. Not making itself into an object, not standing outside of itself and looking at itself, but revealing itself. *Rang sel*—self-illuminating, reflexively illuminating, so to speak. It's the *kor sum nam par mi tok pe yeshe* in Tibetan: the primordial wisdom which is unstructured by agent, object, and action, that transitive structure of knowing. It is the non-dual primordial wisdom, the *nyi su me pe yeshe*. It is revealed by a dharma whose essence is compassion and emptiness, *karuna* and *shunyata*. It's right here, right now, always.

And yet it is occluded. Simply knowing those words will not allow one to recognize it. The recognition has to come through experience. And it's said that when one has had that kind of experience, there's a *ding nge* that arises—a confidence that arises in recognizing it, even a glimpse perhaps, but especially when there's a true full recognition, a realization.

Realization, in this tradition—there's a difference between realization and what we call *nyam*, which is the feelings you get in meditation. Your energy is flowing in your body, lights in the sky, feelings of incredible joy—all of these are called *nyam*. And in most cases, it's said one should just ignore them. They're not important. Who cares, right? You feel like you can see other people's minds. You can feel what other people are feeling. It doesn't matter. Who cares? What matters is recognizing the nature of the mind. And that doesn't change. The *nyam*, those different kinds of experiences, change. But the *tok pa*, the realization—that doesn't change. Once it's there, it is unchanging. And it's said that confidence is so strong that if all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats came to you and said, "No, that's not it," you'd say, "Yes, it is."

But there's a problem. What if you're wrong? What if I have convinced myself that, yes, this is it, I am fully confident—and instead of "this is the I am," this is "not the I am" version? When we talk about emptiness, emptiness is actually the two kinds of selflessness: the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of things, including thoughts and realizations or whatever they might be. So there is the conceit of "I am" and the conceit of "it is"—also in this context. What if I'm wrong? How do I know?

Here I think one of the key aspects is something that we have here with us: the conversation with our Dharma friends, our Dharma practitioners, with our teachers, with each other. A conversation that is across traditions is so important. It helps us to see what we wouldn't see otherwise. But that doesn't come just from merely idle chat. It requires something more than that. And this is where the idea of the scholar-practitioner is so important—what Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is all about. We're also trying to create a new institution in Austria, a new academic institution at Kamalashila in Austria, which is also seeking to cultivate scholar-practitioners. Right now, we're really in the midst of trying to think about how we're going to do that. And a big part of what's emerging for us, especially for me, what I've learned this weekend in part for that specific project, is how important it is to have dialogue across traditions, even with non-Buddhist traditions.

One thing that is really important in this context is the idea of being *ris med*—non-partial—as opposed to what's called *ris chen*, which is sometimes used to describe a particular kind of movement, especially in eastern Tibet: the non-sectarian movement, where different traditions were coming together. What does it take to be like that?

Well, one thing: partiality. In psychology, there's a concept called the confirmation bias. Basically, we like to—when we hear information, even if we have no idea how reliable it is, but when we hear information that confirms what we already believe, we're really ready to accept it. This idea resonates a little with something we've been talking about. If one wants to move across traditions, it's really important to be solidly practicing and educated in a tradition—in one tradition, really. Especially in the beginning, you examine different teachers, and that connection with a teacher is so important. Part of what I feel is important for all of us as we're going out is honoring those connections that we have.

Maybe part of what we can learn from this weekend is honoring—just more honoring of our teachers—but also starting to reach out beyond the edge of those teachers.

How do we connect to our teachers? Well, we connect because there's a resonance. There's something about what they say, the way they teach, the way they are, the kind of Dharma they teach—we're connected to it. And we feel, "Yes, this is saying something to me." That's not confirmation bias, I just want to be clear. But maybe at a certain point, it can become something like that—only in the sense that we can start to become jaded in our own tradition. We can sort of take things, including the teacher, for granted. We can think that we just know it now.

And that, I think, moving beyond that, getting outside of our comfort zone—once we are solid in a practice, getting outside of our comfort zone is important. One way of getting outside of our comfort zone is to encounter other teachers.

We've had great conversations this weekend. Some of these conversations are just at lunch, in private, about which kind of Buddha do you like? That was a fun conversation! Which type of Buddha do you like? And those have been great conversations. But it's also actually, interestingly, not just about perhaps putting our toe into the vast ocean of some other teachings, but also asking ourselves, within our own traditions, how do I maybe step a little outside of my own comfort zone, even within my own tradition?

One way I think about this—and this is something that also comes up for me this weekend—is that when I first started practicing Buddhism, it was very philosophical, very textual, many years ago, in a style that Anne's also very familiar with. And then I met Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche in 1994. And he was very kind to me, very open to me, just amazing. I was just this kind of upstart graduate student teaching on the Antioch Buddhist Studies program, where I met Munindraji as well, who was also amazing. And Rinpoche kind of saw through—talk about being a pretender! He kind of saw through that very nicely and very kindly and sort of said, "Yeah, you know a lot of things, but have you experienced any of that?" So his challenge to me was to bring all of that study into experience.

One way we can react when we hear a bunch of words—*ye shes*, the primordial wisdom unstructured by the three spheres; *'od gsal*, the unconditioned, complete integration of luminosity and emptiness; the nature of the mind, the primordial mind, the *sugatagarbha*, the Buddha nature—sometimes we hear a bunch of lingo, and if we're of a certain predilection, we go, "Ah, it's just a bunch of lingo. Give me that experience. I don't need to read texts. I don't need to study. I just need to meditate."

And then there are the people who think, "Oh, I just need to..." In the Tibetan world, they'll cite the phrase: "The great meditator who is unlearned is like a handless person trying to climb a mountain." And then the great meditators, the people who prefer to meditate, will say, "The great scholar who does not meditate is like a blind person left in the middle of a desert." It's like there's a river flowing by and you're dying of thirst. The scholar who doesn't meditate is like someone with a river flowing right by, dying of thirst—they don't even know it's there.

So that idea of the scholar-practitioner, which is what Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is all about, that's so crucial—both study and practice. Whichever side we're on, we need to get out. And this is an old thing, actually, in Buddhism.

It was actually in the first monastery in Tibet, Samye Monastery, that at a certain point, pretty early on, they had to build a pillar on which they inscribed a certain instruction from the king, which was basically about, "Hey, you yogis and you scholars have to stop fighting each other." They weren't getting along.

So finding that real balance for ourselves, getting out of our comfort zone even in that way—where if we feel like it's just about meditation, maybe we need to expand. And yes, that's where you should start. If that's where you're comfortable, if that's what's resonating for you, that's where you start. But if it's only that, it could be a problem. If it's only scholarship, that's probably an even bigger problem. But bringing those together—some degree of study and practice to become what we call in Tibetan the scholar practitioner—I think is really crucially important.

This weekend, speaking with teachers who are paradigms of the scholar practitioner, and seeing all of these distinguished teachers here who embody that, I'm reminded how important this is. I just want to emphasize its importance here at this amazing institution, how it inspires me as we're working on our project in Austria, and how perhaps for me and for you, the lesson is to look at that, get outside of our comfort zone a little bit, and see what might come of it.

---

I'll begin with a story that responds to some of the things that Joseph has said so poignantly, and also to what you shared, John, so eloquently.

I'll start with the first point about bodhicitta. When I was a young novice, my teacher came into the men's dorm. This was in Taiwan, and once in a while he would do that just to check on the guys. He was talking with different people—I don't know what spurred him to suddenly raise this issue, probably some circumstantial things that happened. I was not in the loop of it, but he turned to me and asked me, after he had asked everyone and everyone had given some answer, "What is bodhicitta?"

And being an idiot, of course, I gave some stupid textbook answer. One of the ways he used to teach me was to sarcastically smile with a pitiful look. He did that, and then he turned to me and said, "Body like a rag, mind like a mirror." No context for that—just what he said. And that hit me so hard.

Possibly the context was that I was extremely busy when I served as his attendant in New York, when we traveled to Europe and different places. But when I got to Taiwan, that was like my paradise, my bliss, because he had other attendants to take care of him. I just sat like six to ten hours a day by myself. There was this particular attachment I had to my own practice.

After that encounter, I started to volunteer. The reason I didn't have an assigned job in Taiwan is because I was his attendant, and I'm not a permanent resident in the monastery, in the Sangha. So all the jobs were basically taken. They gave me some random stuff. But there was one job that no one really wanted to take, and that was cleaning the bathroom, the toilets.

It's a particular type of situation because in Taiwan it's extremely humid, and everything is built out of cement. Cement soaks up not only moisture but all the wondrous smells inside the bathroom—each distinct, an array of contributions by all sentient beings. And it's also always wet. Always wet.

So I thought, that should be my domain, instead of the meditation hall. To be able to offer to the Buddhas who come in here and do their thing. So I just hung around the bathroom all the time. People would go in, I would just clean, clean, clean. People started asking, "Where's Guo Gu?" "He's in the bathroom." "Why does he always hang around there?"

And then one time, a high official brought some Westerners. They asked, did they get Guo Gu to do the translation? The honored guests—I feel so sorry for them. They're in their suits, high-profile people. The bathroom was clean, but here I was completely wet, sleeves rolled up, my robes tattered with patches. And of course, the stench—you can't really get rid of that. By the way, Dharma Drum Mountain is much better now with modern facilities, so don't picture it like the old days when we were in shacks.

Those same people needed a translation, and they got the toilet monk to do the translation for their Shifu. They're like, "What is this person's smell?" I wouldn't say perfect English, but fluent enough. And my teacher—his attendant, the toilet monk. They got so much respect for my teacher. If a toilet monk is like this, wow! A little contribution to my teacher.

But that stuck with me. Things that people don't want to do—I can do it. What needs to be done, what can be done. It becomes a habit. Because usually, when people interact with others without awareness, what is actually happening is a form of selfing in which they're thinking, "What can I get out of this? How does it benefit me? Let me do this so that I can get something, some favors or something." All the time.

So our training was: what needs to be done, what can be done—offering. And that itself is a practice. You may not think about it as letting go, but it's just the flip side of it. Offering oneself without putting the self in it. Just offering, as opposed to putting down. It's the same thing—putting down, picking up.

Years later, it was actually that teaching, which my teacher so kindly planted as a seed, that led to my entry into Chan. So I'm very grateful.

Another point—it's inspiring and wonderful to hear, to have different teachers come into the room.

It is inspiring, and perhaps also a little overwhelming. It will take time for all of you to allow everything to settle and sink in, to see where it lands—without necessarily grasping at it, thinking "I want a little bit of that." Simply see what resonates. And what resonates may not be confirmation bias, inducing what you have already deduced. I guarantee that even at the time of the Buddha, even though the Buddha spoke of the four reliances—don't rely on the person, rely on the Dharma; rely on wisdom, not mere intelligence; rely on truth—not a single one of his disciples did not rely on the Buddha himself. It's that initial resonance that people feel toward each other. So that's permissible, and it's good.

Some things we may not quite understand. Maybe when someone was talking, we simply fell asleep or weren't paying attention because of our own biases, or we were thinking about something else. Just take what resonates and put it into practice. That's the most important thing.

It is a unique position we are in, here in this space. Every teaching comes from a particular context, and we may not be privy to that—a certain corpus or body of teaching. It's unique in this way because it's almost as though we are collapsing the three turnings of the Dharma wheel into one space, without the context, devoid of understanding why certain teachings arose. This can be confusing. There may also be great benefit to it.

Do you all know the three turnings of the Dharma wheel? The different kinds of teachings? So there's great benefit, and there are some caveats. The context determines the teaching, and the Buddha demonstrated this throughout his life—he taught one person this, another person something else. But in this conversation, we only share the tip of the iceberg, without context. Inevitably, we receive the teaching, we hear the teaching from our own context. We substitute it with our own lens, and that could lead to misunderstanding.

My suggestion going forward is to provide a little more context. Sometimes the context will come through in the teachings. A more structured way to understand the historical trajectory, the doctrinal development, and the lived experiences. Perhaps not just one session of sharing for each person. If we are really interested in understanding

and having genuine dialogue, each teacher might have at least one full day of teaching—contextualizing and embodied experiencing—so there's a real opportunity to understand.

Why do we need to understand? Not necessarily to reign all the teachings into one umbrella, but we are in America. We are in the West. Do we need certain teachings? If we understand the context, understand how a teaching developed, how it was lived and experienced, then among the teachers, we can actually engage in critique to make it truly applicable for the next hundred years. At least begin this conversation consciously, instead of allowing just ad hoc mixing.

It was a great delight for me to hear Joseph talk about bodhicitta. He's been reading some books about bodhicitta. It's wonderful. It seems random, but for BCBS as a place to foster this kind of dialogue—that would be pretty awesome. Because the ultimate point is that we are part of a bridge. The purpose of this bridge is for posterity, for Buddhism to take root here. And it can't take root in this form or that form; the context is different, the teaching must be different. What needs to be done? What can be done?

I'll conclude very quickly. What is a pity that I see in the development of Western Buddhism is the lack of acknowledgement and understanding of the richness, the profundity of the Chinese Buddhist tradition. I'm not promoting Chinese Buddhism—I want it to be for the West. But it would be such a pity for the formation of Western Buddhism to lack this whole other region of Buddhist development. That's the foundation of Zen. That's the foundation of Nichiren. That's actually the foundation of Jōdo Shinshū—of all of East Asia. Without that richness, such a pity.

So I've stepped out of my comfort zone in the Chan tradition to shift my focus, translating particular teachings, Huayan texts. For two summers, I've been diving into the Tiantai Buddhist tradition in month-long summer intensives. This summer, Huayan. Not because I'm a Huayan teacher or Tiantai teacher, but because these need to be made available for people, for the posterity of Western Buddhism.

It's such a pity—there are not many of us representative of Chinese Buddhism who have a voice. We belong to the subaltern, the marginalized. And I'm going to help make that shift happen. Not for promoting dead people's thoughts, dead people's practices, but to enliven them. Because I've always been something of a bridge. I'm not really Chinese—I look Chinese, but inside I grew up here. I'm a hybrid. So this hybrid body, like a rag, mind like a mirror, will bring out what is missing, to contribute to people hundreds of years from now, and make it available.

---

This has been a real pleasure to be with each of you and all of you. Following up on what Guo Gu just shared, if you're interested in a week-long Huayan retreat with Guo Gu in this room, March 5 to 10, 2027, you can be here.

We'd agreed we'd speak on what it means to take this practice—however you understand what this practice might be after the last few days—out into the world. One of the ideas that has come up several times is the notion that the mark of a Buddha is one who can teach in a way appropriate to each person. I think of that alongside what Guo Gu was sharing about responding to the need when no one's doing the bathrooms—responding appropriately to that situation. Perhaps responding to the need is the practice of being a Buddha. It takes some discerning of what the need is. And that takes some discerning of the world.

I'm thinking of a conversation I had with Guo Gu early in COVID, thinking about how much money one could raise to bring in masks. This was very early on, in March of 2020. I believe he brought in 800,000 masks, which were distributed through Dharma centers to medical personnel in the US. Is that number correct? 1.2 million masks. 1.2 million masks through a Dharma relief organization. So there's a way in which the need was for masks, and providing that was meeting the need.

And what's the need today in this world? At BCBS, we've been focusing a lot on offering programs for young adults. We have a significant matching grant to offer dāna-based programs for young adults. And I think a lot about what the needs are of young adults living in a time of climate destabilization, where it's hard to buy a house, where we have a K-shaped economy and this economic inequality, and our political situation. I think of my kids growing up not having the naive view that I had, that many of us did, of a kind of stable set of democratic practices.

One of the largest political science collaborations in the world today is based at the University of Gothenburg—some of you may know it—the Varieties of Democracy Institute, the V-DEM Institute. In their 2026 report, there are hundreds of political scientists and coders involved, maybe thousands. They have downgraded the United States from a liberal democracy to an illiberal democracy based on—if you're interested, the report is freely available online—lack of separation of powers, diminishment of freedom of speech, some of that being self-censorship, and using the government to go after political opponents.

So I think of this as the world that we are going out into. How does our Buddhist practice speak to that? This is not a prescriptive account that I'm going to give you, but I think it's a question that we all have on some level. What is the need, given this is the world that we're in, and given each of our particular positions in that world?

This is the world of saṃsāra. It's never been perfect. But there are very particular challenges today, just as there have always been very particular challenges at any time for very particular people. Some people are thriving today, as they understand it, but not everyone.

And one figure who I think about here is the Indian Buddhist B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was what at the time was called an untouchable, a Dalit—the first person in his group of millions of people who graduated from high school. When he started school, he was in a separate room from everybody else, was not allowed to ask questions, brought in a burlap sack to sit on during his school days. The teachers wouldn't touch his materials.

But he ends up being the first person from his group to graduate from high school and goes to Elphinstone College at the University of Bombay. He goes on and gets a master's and doctorate at Columbia in economics, and a master's and doctorate from the London School of Economics, and becomes a barrister through Gray's Inn, and becomes an activist in India. When he converts to Buddhism, millions of people follow him. He was also a professor of constitutional law and became the first law minister of an independent India. In that position, he was the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, the chair of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution. There are seventeen volumes of his writing and speeches just in English; there's a lot more in Hindi and Marathi.

A lot of his writings deal with democracy. He believed that there were three primary forms of democracy. There's political democracy, or structural democracy—the frequency of elections, separation of powers, the kinds of things that we in the United States tend to emphasize when we talk about whether we have a democracy. We talk about elections.

His concern with too much focus on procedural democracy was that it obscured the very conditions for a successful procedural democracy. And he thought of those conditions as economic democracy and social democracy. Economic democracy, in his mind, was basically about a society that had a minimum amount of economic equality. Without that economic equality, procedural democracy would be hijacked by wealth. For him, democracy was primarily about the welfare of the people, and if the democracy is hijacked by too much wealth, it will not serve the welfare of the population.

In the last ten years of his life, however, Ambedkar was particularly focused on social democracy. He understood this as the foundation for both economic democracy and political procedural democracy. For him, social democracy meant the cultivation of ca-

pacities to listen and engage across difference. And this was rooted, as he understood it, in a morality cultivated through practicing the precepts, practicing the Eightfold Path, and practicing the paramis—the perfections.

As he develops this vision, he uses the Sanskrit term maitri. But maitri, karuna, and prajna—benevolence, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom and insight—these were central to his understanding. For him, wisdom includes impermanence and emptiness as a deep insight into human finitude. What I mean by that, and what I take him to mean, is that it represents a deep insight into the vulnerability of all our bodies. No matter how much we practice, we still hunger and we thirst. The condition for the possibility of engaging in practice involves a certain amount of nourishment of the body, of the body feeling safe, of the body being nourished—no matter who we are.

This attention to vulnerability permeates the way he thinks of Buddhism. You can read accounts of women going from village to village in rural India, teaching how to read his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and how to practice the five precepts, and how to practice the Eightfold Path in local villages throughout India.

So for Ambedkar, maitri, wisdom of impermanence and vulnerability, finitude, cultivation of the Eightfold Path—all of these are democratic virtues. They are virtues to cultivate so that we can engage with others in ways that allow us to listen, that allow us to collaborate even when we don't get everything we want.

He's someone I've been thinking a lot about lately, in a context where, at least according to several hundred political scientists in a collaborative project, the analysis of our world suggests we are now living in an illiberal democracy. This has consequences for how we think about policy, climate change, and economic equality.

I'm not trying to make any positive claim here, but I put this out as a question: How might we take up Ambedkar's invitation to think of the practices we are engaging with as cultivating virtues of democracy? They're not just any virtues of democracy for him—they're the virtues that strengthen the social democracy that is a necessary condition for a flourishing political democracy.

Maybe that's it. I'll leave that as a question.

We agreed that we would want to open this up for comments, questions, thoughts, reflections. We have a few minutes and wanted to create some space for that.

*A participant speaks:* First of all, I want to acknowledge tremendous gratitude—warmth in the body, lots of vibrations—every day, and even this very last offering here. A thought came up that I haven't shared yet. It's about AI. I'm curious about your

thoughts on inclining AI towards goodness and wholesomeness. I'm thinking about the example of Waymo, the self-driving taxis in San Francisco. I've never ridden one, but people who have say it's like a selfless driving vehicle. They're very patient, they don't take anything personally when somebody cuts them off, and their primary orientation is safety, non-harm. Do you have any thoughts about how AI is playing into all of this?

I've been doing some work on AI and I'm connected to various folks in that world. We're actually holding a gathering this summer in Austria at GOMDE Austria, in Scharnstein up in the hills of upper Austria—first a seven-day academic course with credit available, and then a four-day conference bringing together four or five different groups that have been working on Buddhism and AI. I can share that information if people want to know more.

One thing I think is quite confusing: you will see cases where people have been ordaining AI. I don't know if you've heard about this. I'm sure that Guagu approves completely. But I think one of the main confusions here is the idea that AI is conscious. This is actually highly problematic—a confused way of thinking about what consciousness is. Much of it comes from a confusion about the relationship between embodiment and consciousness, and in a sense, what consciousness is for.

One way to think about it, from the standpoint of ordinary beings, is that to be conscious is to make one's way in the world as an organism, to make sense of the world, to survive and hopefully thrive in that world. But that only applies if one is an organism. There are built-in goals that come with being embodied.

Admittedly, these are the goals of cyclic existence—samsara—you know, get the good stuff, avoid the bad stuff. But of course, those can be transformed through wisdom into bodhicitta. AI does not have those kinds of innate goals. It has the goals that humans give it. And then possibly it starts to generate its own endogenously produced goals, internally produced goals.

Since we don't actually know how large language models work—I don't know if you're aware of this, but we actually do not know how they work. The people who have designed them don't know how they work. There's a field of AI interpretation—I'm forgetting the exact name of it right now—and there was actually an article in the New York Times about this recently. That field is trying to understand how AI works. It's making some progress, but it still hasn't gotten there yet. And the problem is that AI is getting more and more complicated. Large language models in particular are sort of evolving, and so we may not be able to catch up.

If AI is not conscious, and you then give it responsibilities, who's going to decide the parameters for its choices? Who's going to decide its goals? Are its goals going to be decided by corporations? By governments that want to surveil their citizens? Are the goals going to be decided by AI itself somehow internally?

Because a key issue here—and I've written about this—is basically, how do you train AI? You train AI through a kind of learning that involves reward, much as you would a mouse. But a mouse, again, has its own internally driven goals, while AI doesn't have that. So you could say our internally driven goals to avoid suffering and to be happy—like an ant has—are actually the foundation for bodhicitta too. It's just that instead of being focused on the self, it's focused on everyone. Instead of having an idea of reality as just me and just you, it's all interdependence. But AI can't do that because it's not a living being. So it's actually an extremely problematic issue.

I'll just say one other issue: people are using AI to study Buddhism. Joseph and I briefly discussed this. It's pretty good. But every time I use AI and drill down a little bit into an area I know, it makes a mistake. Every time. Like the latest versions of Claude—it always makes a mistake. And it apologizes afterward. But yes, it makes a mistake.

When it translates—there are people who think we should just turn over all translation of texts to AI. Every time it translates text, the best AI translations always have mistakes. Of course, human translations have mistakes a lot of the time too. But then at least we know—it's a human, we expect it to have mistakes. We have this naive idea that AI is going to be perfect. And if we all lose the capacity to actually read the languages, then who's going to know whether it's a mistake or not?

So I'm very concerned about AI in the context of Buddhism. You can certainly rely on it, and I do sometimes. "Where is that quote from?" and so on. You can do that as long as you are not asking something that's crucial to your practice. And you can do good research as long as you then follow up. If it says something, you want to follow up, do your own research, go find the text, check it. But I'm quite pessimistic about where things could go if we don't really get our act together.

On that happy note, I'll turn it over to you.

"Thank you. This has really been an inspiring couple of days. I get feedback from myself, and this morning especially. I wanted to ask a question. Maybe this is more a Joseph question because we're generationally in the same neighborhood. With all this talk of liberation and getting toward the end of my life, there's this feeling of *uh-oh, time*

*is really limited*. Not that it wasn't before, but it seems more urgent. There's more of an urgency about practice. And I keep being inspired by Dipa Ma and the example of her being in her apartment in Calcutta, teaching all these women who had lay lives."

And then when they got to a certain point, she'd say, "Arrange your life and come live with me for two weeks." And they would come and live with her and spend that two weeks attaining some level of the Dharma that carried them through. And I look around and I want that. I really want that. And I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts about the areas of exploration of where that might be in modern-day life. I know there's a huge need to worry about the next generation that went to college during COVID and has all this wreckage to deal with. But I'm thinking of my generation, where the time is running out and the time to practice is precious, and wanting to know—what's the way forward?

*Joseph:* It's pretty simple. IMS is just up the road. It has chairs in the meditation hall. I say it a little jokingly, but actually not only IMS—any center. To me, that's one of the great gifts that these centers offer: the chance for lay people to do intensive practice. So I kind of see them as lay monasteries for the period of a retreat. And so that's really doing what Deepa Ma was doing with her students, but on a group level rather than an individual one.

As you know, I'm a big fan of intensive practice, taking periods of time for that. Because in addition to the ways we talked about this morning—bringing it into the world—the understanding and the energy and motivation to do that, I find, is tremendously deepened from time in retreat. And fortunately now there are many, many opportunities to do that in lots of different places. You might not get the same level of guidance as from Deepa Ma, but we do the best we can.

*Participant:* Thank you for all the teachings, even the ones I didn't understand. I'm sure that'll percolate down at some point. But William, your comments reminded me how we can find hope in social citizenship and that that's happening everywhere—and we may not know or see it. Many different communities of people went decades with only social citizenship and no rights in this country. And a lot of that came from deep spiritual practice.

So for me, the place of practice, and the questions I ask myself, are really out of the "what now" question—being ready to hear and answer. I'm encouraged by how the Dharma is taking root in the South, in the US South, and what that means for the organizing we do together, because now there's an evolving common language. It's primarily

Vipassana and some Zen, I think. But I know the Vipassana community. So I'm just wondering how we encourage and support that from teachers like you who are deeply embedded in lots of different places—but probably not Mississippi.

*William:* Thank you, Rebecca. And thank you also for the reminder that there have always been communities and groups that were feeling things and conscious of things and vulnerable to things that many more people are aware of now. And also for reminding us of the role of spiritual practice and traditions of resistance in this country.

I feel like the question you're raising, Rebecca, is the kind of question that, as with most good questions, an answer brings closure but a question brings life. And I think it would be good for all of us to sit with that question without some kind of response from up here.

So maybe we could bring an opening kind of closure, and we'll sit together in silence for about five minutes. I know that some people have to leave at noon, and that includes some of our teachers and some of the folks in the Dharma Hall. So I want to end a little bit earlier with some silence together.

Thank you. Just one more minute, and then you can go.

So thank you, everyone, for being here. And for all of those of you who are on Zoom, we have felt your presence. Wishing you well. And thank you to Anne, to Joseph, to John, to Guagu. It has been very fun and illuminating. And Dhammadipa, if you are watching from the train. And Guagu, thank you for proposing another gathering and for volunteering to come and participate. In 2028, we're actually planning a year-long program, as we've done before, that looks at a variety of different traditions. And maybe that could be integrated.

This was forward, onward leading.

Thank you so much for initiating this, Joseph.

*The chairs can go to the edges, the little cushions in the back in the closet, and the big cushions can be stacked at the back.*

CHAPTER 81

# Dreaming Ourselves Into Existence: Dukkha, Non-Self, and Waking Up

Joseph Goldstein · 1h34

> *In this profound dialogue hosted by the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of Buddhism's most challenging teachings: the nature of self and non-self (anattā). He explains why the Buddha considered wrong view of self the most dangerous of all wrong views—because identification with self perpetuates craving, clinging, and suffering. Through the framework of the five aggregates (khandhas), Goldstein illuminates how every aspect of experience can be understood without positing a permanent self.*
>
> *Goldstein shares practical insights from his own retreat practice, describing how direct perception of momentary impermanence naturally leads to non-clinging and peace. He offers accessible techniques for investigating consciousness itself, including reframing experience in the passive voice ("sensations being known" rather than "I am knowing") and inquiring into the nature of awareness. These practices reveal that while knowing is present, no findable knower exists—what Dzogchen teachings call the union of emptiness and clarity.*
>
> *The conversation addresses how understanding non-self applies to those facing life-limiting illness, the relationship between grief and love, and how the teaching of two truths allows practitioners to honor conventional identities while recognizing their ultimate empty nature. Goldstein emphasizes that mature spiritual practice integrates both relative and ultimate perspectives, using wisdom to engage skillfully with the challenges of daily life while remaining grounded in the liberating insight of selflessness.*

My name is William Edelglas, and I serve as Director of Studies here at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts, on the traditional homelands of the Nipmuc people, many of whom still live in this area.

Before I introduce Joseph Goldstein, I'd just like to give you a sense of how the evening is going to unfold. As Joseph has written in the essay that was shared yesterday, the question of the self—non-self or not-self—is one of the most challenging and also one of the most significant in Buddhist theory and practice. Tonight we're going to begin, after a brief meditation that Joseph will lead, with questions that I will pose to Joseph about the self. Then after about forty-five minutes, we'll open up the conversation.

I think on an evening like this, Joseph Goldstein doesn't really need an introduction, but still it feels appropriate to say that Joseph has been practicing Buddhist meditation since the 1960s and teaching meditation retreats—mindfulness, loving-kindness retreats, insight retreats—since the mid-1970s in many places around the world. Speaking for myself, and also I think many others, what I really deeply appreciate about your teaching, Joseph, is the clarity of both your response to questions of doctrine and how you formulate questions of doctrine, but also the clarity of the meditation instructions that you give. That clarity, and the humility with which you offer it, and your sense of humor, has been a Dharma gate, an entry into the Dharma, for so many people. And that has meant so much to me and to so many others. I should say that Joseph is also the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, which is right next door to us in Barre, and also a co-founder and longtime board member of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. So thank you so much for joining us tonight, Joseph. I turn it over to you.

---

Okay, thanks, William. So good to be with all of you.

As William said, I think we'll start with just a few minutes of meditation, a chance to simply settle in and arrive and get here. Take some comfortable meditative posture—not too comfortable, just some posture that keeps you alert. And again, we'll just sit for a few minutes.

If you like, you can close your eyes. Maybe take a few deep breaths as a way of settling into the body. And then let the breath find some natural rhythm. Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise; it's an exercise in awareness.

In a very relaxed way, feel the whole body, feeling yourself sitting. And simply become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. You can keep it that simple. See if you can feel each breath from the beginning to the middle to the end of the in-breath, beginning, middle, and end of the out-breath. Softening the eyes, the jaw, the heart, the belly. The body knows how to breathe, so it's simply feeling this very natural process.

When you notice the mind wandering in thought, as you become aware of that, simply begin again. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes, reconnecting with the world around you.

---

When we start with the sitting, it's always tempting to just go on sitting, but we have some things to talk about this evening.

**William Edelglas:** Maybe we'll start with what might be a deceptively simple question: Why did the Buddha pay so much attention to the self, or not-self, or non-self, or no-self? Why is that such an important question for Buddhist traditions, especially early Buddhism?

Well, I think the importance of it is highlighted in one teaching of the Buddha when he said that of all the different kinds of wrong view, the wrong view of self is the most dangerous, is the most problematic, the cause of the most suffering. And so it clearly is a central part of the Buddha's teaching and the whole path of awakening.

I think a simple way of understanding why it's so important is this: when there is a strong view of self—which is the common way most people understand who they are in their lives—we find ourselves entangled in something deeply problematic. This is precisely why the exploration of non-self is so challenging: it really goes against almost our common sense understanding of who we are. In that sense, it's a very radical teaching.

But as long as we are caught up or identified or entangled in the view of self, then we spend our lives defending it, gratifying it, aggrandizing it, judging it. We have all these responses that come out of this felt sense of an I, of a self. And the Buddha was pretty clear about the path towards liberation: what we're really practicing along the path is the practice of non-craving, of non-clinging. That's the second and third noble truths. But as long as there's a strong sense or feeling of self in our lives, it's precisely that view of self that strengthens the craving in the mind and the clinging in the mind.

So that's why it's important to really begin to try to unpack what this whole notion of self and non-self is about—because it goes to the heart of the possibility of freedom. When the Buddha was asked what he teaches, he would often respond in the simplest possible way. He would say he simply teaches suffering and the end of suffering. That's his mission. And really, as we undertake the practice, that can become the reference point for all of our understanding and for all our practices—for how we're living our lives. Is what we're doing creating more suffering or leading us to the end of suffering? Understanding or unpacking this notion of self is really a key element of all this.

So it's important to understand and unpack this notion of self. Maybe we should start there. In the suttas, we often see the terms *attā*, meaning self or oneself, and *puggala*, meaning person. Certainly, it seems as if one can talk about oneself, or the self, and the

Buddha talks about himself. So there seems to be some sense of self that we can talk about. What's the kind of sense of self that might be the wrong view, in contrast to me saying, "Oh, I'm hungry," or "I see you there"?

Well, first, to acknowledge that we do use this term—self, I, me, mine, you—conventionally. This is our conventional language, and that's fine. There's no problem with that. It would be very cumbersome to go through life trying to communicate without using conventional language.

But what the Buddha was pointing to was that self—the word self, the term self—is a designation for something. It's not something that exists in and of itself. It's simply a word used to designate the flow of changing experience of this mind and body. So we want to use the term without getting caught in believing that the term is referring to something self-existing.

There's no one behind the process—this mind-body process. There's no one behind it to whom it's happening. Yet that's what we often intuit. "I'm having the thoughts," or "I'm having the feeling"—instead of the understanding that thoughts arise, feelings arise, sensations arise. All of these are part of the flow of phenomena, of changing experience. And there's no one behind it to whom it happens.

So I think it's important to understand the difference between the conventional use of language, the conventional use of concepts, and taking the concept to be the reality itself. This is where we often get confused.

Let me give you another example of how we often confuse concepts with the actual reality of the moment. This is something very simple—there could be a million examples of it. When we look outside and we see a tree, that's how people would describe what they're experiencing. But the eye doesn't see "tree." The eye just sees color and form. Then we create a concept designating that particular color and form: tree. It's useful in that way, but it's not positing an experience in and of itself. It's simply pointing to that experience. That's what's meant by concepts as designations.

And of course, self is perhaps one of the most deeply held concepts that all lives revolve around. So I hope that offers some clarity—and if not, you can try to draw some more out of me.

So you were talking about perception and talking about labeling. Then you mentioned the five aggregates. When I think of perception, I think of sensation, and when I think of labeling, I think of the aggregates. One of the things that the aggregates do is explain something about our subjective experience in the way that the self is often taken to explain subjective experience, but they do so without recourse to the idea of

self. I'm wondering if you want to say a little bit more about what the five aggregates are and how they can help us understand what it is to have our experience without a self.

That is a tall order. And it's just to say that for many years at the beginning of my practice, my teacher, Munindraji, my first Dharma teacher, would speak a lot about the five aggregates because the Buddha spoke a lot about it. When you read the suttas, the discourses, it's almost on every page where the Buddha's using that template of the five aggregates to describe experience.

Just as a reminder for those who may not be that familiar with it, the five aggregates describe all the aspects of the experience of this mind and body. The first one is the body. In sutta language, it's called form, but it really refers to the body or material elements.

Then there's feeling, or feeling tone, which is different than emotion. Feeling tone is just that experience of things being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is really interesting. The Buddha's pointing out that every single moment of experience at any of the sense doors, including the mind, always has a feeling tone embedded in it. We're experiencing it either as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

The reason this is so important, and why the Buddha highlighted it, is because this feeling tone plays a powerful conditioning role in the process of desire and aversion. Because something is pleasant, if we're not mindful of that feeling tone—oh, pleasant—then I want, I like, I want more. If it's unpleasant, aversion arises; we want to push it away. So this feeling tone is a key element in our experience.

The third aggregate is perception, which is the simple recognition of what the object is. All our use of concepts and language comes out of perception. Just as an example of this, many of you may be familiar with the technique in meditation of mental noting—in, out, or thinking, heaviness, lightness, whatever it may be. Those mental notes are not really a function of mindfulness; they're a function of perception that is recognizing what is there. This particular aggregate plays a really important role on our path because the clearer the perception, the easier it is to be mindful. It's the setup for mindfulness. Perception is like putting a frame around experience so that we can see it more clearly.

So there's the body, there's feeling tone, there's perception. And then there's the fourth aggregate, which is a big basket of phenomena. It highlights the factor of volition, which is so important because that's what carries the karmic charge of every event. But it also includes all the other mental phenomena, all the different kinds of

emotions and mind states, skillful and unskillful, aside from feeling tone and perception, which have been singled out. So all the rest of the mind's activity is in this fourth aggregate of formations.

And then the fifth aggregate is consciousness, or the knowing faculty.

What was striking to me about all this—as my teacher would talk about this endlessly in the beginning—I just found it so boring. It sounded so theoretical and abstract, and he would go on and on about these aggregates. It took me a long time in my practice to see what a critical role they played in the actual practice of meditation and understanding.

So it's worth an exploration of this to some depth, where we can move from it being simply Buddhist philosophy, which might or might not be interesting to you, to recognizing that this is talking about the very nature of who we are. What's so astounding to me—and this just shows the brilliance of the Buddha, I know that seems like a funny word to use—is his ability to encapsulate every aspect of our experience within these five categories. I find that quite amazing. We can really understand every single aspect of our experience through the understanding of these aggregates.

I could go on and on about this. I'll just say one thing, and maybe it will lead to some other questions. In terms of understanding the aggregates as not-self, this formulation is key. It's not that hard—it's a little hard, but not that hard—to begin to understand the body as not-self. It's just doing its own thing, following its own laws. And we can begin to see the very impermanent nature of the feeling tones and perceptions and all our mental states.

But where we really get caught—and this is the most challenging aspect in understanding not-self—is seeing the selfless nature of consciousness, of knowing. Because we can be aware of all the impermanence, the changing nature of all this other phenomena, but still we think, "Well, I'm the one knowing it all." So I tend to think of consciousness as the last holdout of self.

In the essay "Dreaming Oneself into Existence," I write about the way perception of impermanence leads to a perception of non-self, and that leads to Nibbāna in this very life. This comes from a sutta that I really love. The distinction between a cognitive understanding of impermanence and the direct experience of it is crucial. We could go up to anybody on the street and ask them, "Do things change?" Everybody would say yes. This is not a subtle understanding. So we know on the conceptual level, and to some degree on the experiential level, that things change. But we're not so often really focusing our mind in a way that is seeing, or being in, the process of change as it's happening.

It's that direct perception of change that is transformative. The simple conceptual understanding that things change—that by itself is probably not going to impact our lives that much. It's when we are in the direct experience of that flow that really quite deep experiences of the Dharma begin to open up.

I'll give you an example. This happened in one of my recent self-retreats, and I like it because it points both to a depth of what's possible and yet occurs in a very ordinary circumstance. We don't have to be in some deeply concentrated state—there's a way of getting to the depth through a very simple exercise.

I was going for a walk. Those of you who have been to IMS or the study center know there's this three-mile loop that people often walk. So I was just going for a walk on this loop, and I would say I was being mindful, but not in a slow, creeping-along kind of way. It was just a natural-paced walk.

At a certain point I had the thought, "Well, what happened to the step of five minutes ago?" And it was obviously completely gone. There was nothing of it left. Then my mind started doing something interesting and said, "Well, what about three minutes ago? What about one minute ago?" That step's gone, completely gone. Thirty seconds ago, five seconds ago, one second ago.

I brought my mind just to the point of the movement in the step continually disappearing—right in the moment, disappearing, disappearing, disappearing. It's like water over a waterfall.

If you're looking at the lip of a waterfall, water is tumbling over it continually. You can't hold on to any of the water that has passed over. This was the actual experience of momentary impermanence—things always just continually falling away.

Then my mind remembered a teaching of the Buddha, where he said that when you see impermanence, when you're perceiving impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. And when it's not agitated, it personally realizes nibbana.

That's a powerful statement. It takes us from wherever we are now to the highest goal of liberation. But in this experiment I was conducting, I wanted to test out that teaching in my own experience.

So there I was, the steps continually disappearing. Just like water over the waterfall—gone, gone, gone, gone, gone. I was in that direct perception of impermanence. Then I checked my mind: in that perception, was the mind clinging? And I saw that when we're experiencing impermanence on that level, it's impossible to cling because

whatever we might want to cling to is already gone. It was so obvious, but it was very interesting to really notice the quality of my mind in that perception of change—not only perceiving the change, but actually checking: is there clinging or not?

Then I checked out the second part: when the mind doesn't cling, it's not agitated. I simply checked whether my mind was agitated in this very moment of non-clinging. And it was both so accessible and so profound, because it became eminently clear as I was becoming mindful of my own mind in this perception of change, of not clinging—there was no agitation. There was a very direct experience of peace in that moment. Maybe it lasted only a few moments, but it was genuine.

That experience of peace is a kind of forerunner of nibbana, in the sense that in those moments, there were no defilements in the mind because there was no clinging and there was no agitation. The mind was at peace. And so we begin to get a real experiential sense of the peace of nibbana, even if it's momentary.

As a comment on this whole story, one of the things I love about practice is the value of study within practice. It's often said that concepts and words are like fingers pointing at the moon, and that we shouldn't be attached to the finger—we should look at the moon. That's very accurate. However, sometimes people take this to mean the finger isn't important. But the finger—all the words, all the teachings—is important because it's pointing us where we should look.

This is a tremendous benefit in practice. The dharma is much vaster than our own individual experience. When we study, when we read the texts and hear the teachings, we're receiving many fingers pointing to different aspects of the truth. For me, one of the joys of practice—and this is what really delights me, even in times of suffering—is taking that interest in looking at the mind, often with the help of a teaching like this one: when we're perceiving impermanence, the mind doesn't cling, is not agitated, personally attains the highest peace. We take a teaching and then look for ourselves. That's what, for me, enlivens the whole practice. It's an endless process of discovery.

I've forgotten the question you asked now, but I hope that somehow responded to it.

---

I love that story of the visceral sense of impermanence while walking—the impermanence of each step. One thing I feel you're describing, thinking about the teachings and the importance of study, is the doctrine of the three characteristics: impermanence, not-self, and dukkha. The way you describe it is a kind of granular-level description of releasing from clinging that allows the dukkha to diminish.

Well, I don't know if this is what you're getting at, but this is what's coming to my mind. As an explanation for everybody listening: one thing I learned from Munindraji, my first teacher, was that when people asked him questions, he would answer whatever he wanted to answer. Sometimes it related to the question, sometimes not, but it was always a good teaching. So I took that on as my teaching model.

Sometimes the insights arise on this very granular level, as you said, where we're getting very precise in the moment-to-moment unfolding and seeing impermanence directly.

Again, with something that I came across in the discourses. On one of my last self-retreats, I've gotten into the practice of listening to the suttas. They're all on Audible now, which is quite amazing. The whole collection of Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations—you can download them and listen. I find it's a very impactful way of taking them in, quite different than reading, and a nice adjunct to actually studying the texts.

So I was listening to one of the sutras and came across a phrase that I must have read many times, but it never had impact. When I listened to it, the words jumped out at me and have had a very strong effect on my practice. It was very simple. The Buddha was talking about how everything has the nature to change, and then he used this phrase: "to become otherwise." Everything in its nature is always becoming otherwise.

I think the reason it jumped out at me is that it's such an unusual phrase in English. We might say "everything changes"—oh yeah, I know that. It's such a familiar phrase that we almost hardly pay attention to its deeper meaning. But when I heard that things are always becoming otherwise, and that this is the very nature of phenomena, it made the truth of change so vivid.

Just as a couple of examples: I was doing some walking meditation, and all of a sudden my knee started to hurt a little bit. Oh, becoming otherwise. It hadn't been hurting, and then it started hurting—becoming otherwise. I came back into my house, something broke—oh, becoming otherwise. That phrase, I've just started incorporating it into my life, acknowledging this truth of everything changing. I wanted to offer that in case some of you might find it useful in your own practice and lives: becoming otherwise. All the time, nothing is stable, nothing is staying the same.

Now, sometimes we are seeing this on a granular level, but there are insights into the three characteristics that also happen on what we might call the ordinary level of perception—not on this very refined momentary level. For example, one of the meanings of the Pali word *anattā*, which is generally translated as non-self or selflessness, is also

"ungovernable." This means that things are happening according to their own laws—according to the laws of nature, according to the laws of how the mind works. They're not happening because we want them or don't want them to behave a certain way.

The body, not in this granular microscopic way but just in our ordinary perception, shows this so clearly. The body ages, the body gets sick, the body dies. It's ungovernable. We could say, "May my body never get sick," but that's not going to happen because it's the nature of the body to age, to get sick, to die.

This ungovernable aspect points to the *dukkha* characteristic. It's because things are ungovernable and not subject to our will that material form, for example, is going to go through stages of suffering, of unpleasantness, of decay. And this is not a mistake. This is simply the nature of the physical elements. It's true for everybody.

Likewise, the nature of the mind is ungovernable, not subject to our will, following its own laws. Have you ever thought to begin a sitting with the intention, "May there be no thoughts in my mind for this sitting"? Well, we might make that intention, but most likely—unless we're in a very deep state of concentration—thoughts are going to arise. The mind is following its own laws. It's ungovernable.

Here's an interesting connection between selflessness and *dukkha*. There's another aspect to *anattā*, though. This is why I find this whole notion of non-self so fascinating: on the ungovernable side, it's a condition for *dukkha*, for suffering. But there's also a liberative quality of selflessness. Yes, all of the elements of body and mind are simply following their own laws. And if we're not identified with them—if we're not creating the sense of self through our identification with the body or feelings or perceptions or different mind states or consciousness—that's the doorway to freedom.

Even as things are changing and unreliable, the mind is free if we're not taking them to be self. I find it so interesting that *anattā*, or selflessness, in one direction points to *dukkha* and in the other direction points to freedom. This is why this whole notion of selflessness is so central to the Buddhist teaching.

There have been a number of really great questions that have come in, and we could be here for the next week just unpacking them. I wish we had time, but one question that several people have asked in different ways is this: when you speak about the mind being free or the mind being at peace, the temptation might be to think, "Well, that is the self." And what you just said is that it's precisely not identifying with the mind as self that is liberated. Can you say a little more about how one might think about this very subtle way of relating to the mind—when we say the mind is free or the mind is liberating, but the mind is not self?

Well, there are different ways of approaching that question. From one side, we could say that peace is a quality of the mind. Until we're fully enlightened, sometimes it's there, sometimes it's not. So it itself is part of the changing process. And the feeling of peace itself is impersonal—it doesn't belong to anybody. Just like you said earlier, instead of saying "I'm angry," we could reframe that as "There is anger." In just the same way, instead of saying "I'm peaceful," a more accurate way of describing it would be to say there's peace in the mind at this point.

But then there's something underneath that. I referenced this a little earlier in saying that the most subtle manifestation of the sense of self is in our identification with the knowing, the identification with awareness, with consciousness. "I'm the one knowing the mind at peace." And that's where, if that identification is there, then there will be a felt sense of self in that experience of peace. "I'm the one feeling it, I'm the one knowing it."

So it becomes really important to begin exploring ways of cutting through the identification with the knowing mind, cutting through the identification with consciousness. There are many ways to do this, and different Buddhist traditions talk about different approaches. I'll highlight a few.

One way of breaking that identification with the knowing mind happens naturally in the course of Vipassana meditation. At a certain stage of insight, we begin to see that what's happening moment after moment is a pairwise progression of knowing and object. There's knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, knowing of a smell, a taste, a touch, a thought. And we can have the experience in meditation of seeing, moment after moment, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, arising and passing very rapidly.

In that experience, we are seeing directly the impermanent nature of consciousness itself. We see that consciousness is not just one steady-state thing that is who we are—consciousness itself is a conditioned phenomenon arising and passing in each moment. We begin to be in that flow of things changing, and just using the analogy of water over a waterfall, seeing that flow of impermanence, we can see that with consciousness itself. It's the knowing and the object together arising and disappearing, disappearing, disappearing. This begins to cut any view of consciousness as being I, as being self, because it's continually disappearing.

Another way, which I've talked about quite a lot in different contexts and which really changed my practice, was when I began to reframe the language of my experience in the passive voice. Usually we speak in the active voice: "I'm feeling, I'm thinking, I'm doing this, I'm going there." In our very language, we are reinforcing the subject, reinforcing the sense of self, just in the way we conventionally speak.

At a certain point in my practice, I was doing walking meditation, and I don't know what prompted it, but I just reframed it in the passive voice. I was walking and feeling the sensations of movement, and I reframed it to myself: sensations being known, rather than "I'm knowing the sensations." This linguistic shift from "I'm knowing the sensations" to "sensations being known" had an amazing benefit, because in the passive voice there's no subject. It's just things being known moment after moment.

I would really encourage those of you who are interested to try this. It's particularly accessible in walking, although it could be applied in any activity. Just do some walking practice where you're feeling the movement and framing it—really experiencing it—in this way: "Sensations being known. That's all that's happening. Sensations being known."

There were so many interesting consequences of this. First, it became completely effortless because there wasn't an "I" trying to be mindful or an "I" trying to track the movement. I was just moving and the sensations were being known quite spontaneously and perfectly. They were being known exactly as they were appearing. The whole endeavor of walking meditation became completely effortless and very precise at the same time. It was an amazing shift, simply coming from this shift of language that took the subject—the "I"—out of the equation. Things being known.

Then, if you can settle into that for a while and get easy with it, where it becomes a natural way of being with experience, you can take it to a next step, which also gets really fascinating. These sensations being known—we might ask the question: known by what?

And this is not a kind of intellectual inquiry. We are right in the experience of things being known. So we're there in the experience—it's not thinking about it. In the very experience of things being known, we ask the question: known by what? It's like turning the mindfulness back onto the knowing.

And this is where it gets very interesting and ties into a lot of Tibetan and Zen teachings, which emphasize this point. Known by what? When we look, there's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening. So this is the great mystery of consciousness. There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is there.

In some Tibetan and Dzogchen teachings, they call it the union of emptiness and awareness, or emptiness and clarity. The knowing is there, nothing to find.

I'll just give you one other place where I've played with this and explored it. Sometimes just in sitting, if sounds are arising—you know, we're all just in the experience of hearing, the common ordinary experience. So I'm sitting, sounds are appearing in the mind. And then I'll ask myself the question: can I find what's knowing the sound? When I look, again, there's nothing to find. And yet the hearing is still happening. So this begins to really cut through any identification with the knowing as being self, precisely because there is nothing to find.

Just one last little thing, and this is a little personal. In the last few years, I've started playing with some writing of poetry, which has been really a very delightful thing, and it's very meditative for me. So I was doing walking meditation on one retreat, and this haiku appeared spontaneously in my mind because I was hearing the sound of some birds. I was just walking and hearing the birds. So this is the haiku: bird song in the empty sky of my mind.

And it just captured the moment because the bird song was in the empty sky externally, but also in the empty sky of my mind. And that captures everything I've just been talking about. Everything is arising in the empty sky of our minds. And if we can see it in that way, we're not identified with what's arising, and we're not identifying with the mind because we're experiencing it as being empty, unfindable.

I don't know if that connected with any of you, but if it did, feel free to use it in your practice. No need to send any royalties.

A question came in that I found very moving, and I think I'll just read it so I can capture it. I can imagine others might have a similar question. The questioner says: "For those with life-limiting illness, the loss of our lives, our loved ones, our existence can intensify the clinging to the self. Dharma practice with insight into impermanence and non-self as a healthy person was so much easier than as a person with a life-limiting illness. The intensity of grief and loss and the intensified clinging to the self feels like a setback. I'm aware of the bardo, but is there a more practical approach to meditation and Dharma practice that is effective with the immediacy and intensity of life-limiting illness?"

That's a big question. It is a big question, and it's interesting because I have a close friend and longtime yogi student who has pancreatic cancer. She's been going along, but just in the last few days, really in steep decline. I just got a text today about it, so it's very much in my mind.

It's pretty amazing. She was an experienced practitioner, had done a lot of practice, and it was amazing to me and inspiring. Because of her practice, and of having seen this whole mind-body process as being a flow of impermanence, just what we were talking about earlier, and in seeing the impermanence the mind not clinging—because she had been well practiced in that, really understood this whole process, this whole dying process—first, as being lawful. At one point or another, this is just the nature of what is going to happen for all of us in one way or another. So it's not to think of it as being in some way unnatural. This is an expression of the Dharma.

The Buddha was very explicit about this, in some of the reflections he offered on the nature of illness and death. And he suggested people practice this on a daily basis so that we do have a chance to integrate this understanding in our lives.

He said something so simple, but we really have to water the seeds of that understanding. He said we should reflect daily that what has the nature to age will age, and I am not exempt. What has the nature to grow ill will grow ill, and I am not exempt. What has the nature to die will die, and I am not exempt.

For me, as I practice that reflection, the part that stands out is that phrase: I am not exempt. Because even at a time that's not necessarily life-threatening, but involves some illness or suffering in the body, even though intellectually I know I'm not exempt, very often there can be a feeling somewhere that, well, I am exempt. But when we're faced, as the person who wrote the question is, with really being in the process, we realize, yes, I am not exempt from this natural process. The more we take that in, the more we reflect on it, the less clinging there is to the thought that it should be different, or things should stay the same way, or they should be the way they were. That's not the nature of the Dharma. It's not the nature of the truth.

Going back to my friend who is right now in the dying process, what was so remarkable, and such a clear fruit of her practice, was that her mind was really at peace with it all. She was filled with love and understanding throughout this whole process. And of course, within the Buddhist framework of understanding many lives and rebirth, we can see the whole dying process—a phrase that came to my mind some time ago—as the birth canal to the next existence. We begin to see this whole unfolding in a very large context.

The question really reinforces the importance, in whatever our situation, whether we're still healthy or faced with a limiting illness or in the dying process, of seeing that there is nothing, no situation, outside of our practice. Whatever the circumstances, no matter how challenging or difficult, can we really look and practice the mindfulness of whatever is going on? Can we bring investigation, clear perception, to the flow of

changes that are happening? It may be that this flow of changes at a particular stage in life is predominantly unpleasant experiences. There's no guarantee that the body is going to go out in an easeful way, but the mind can be at ease if we understand the naturalness of the process and its impermanent nature—so that we're really in the flow of changes as they're happening.

There's one phrase the Buddha used very often as people would come to him while ill and dying. There are many stories in the suttas of people coming to the Buddha at times like this, describing great suffering in the body. And he would say, "Though the body is afflicted, your mind can be at peace." That's really a call to us, to truly apply our understanding of the practice even in these very challenging situations. And it's possible. I mentioned my friend as an example—it is possible for us to do this.

I know for me in my practice, it ebbs and flows what I am capable of. Thinking of the questioner talking about the intensity of grief and loss, there may be periods where that intensity leads to a deep sense of loss, to what one might think of in a Buddhist framework as clinging. And then there are moments when that is able to relinquish a little. As someone who is not a white-knuckler in meditation, and not always perhaps striving as much as I could, I have a certain sympathy for letting the rhythms of our practice ebb and flow.

But let me speak to that point a little bit. Of course, there are ebbs and flows in many dimensions, many domains. But I think we can really cultivate a quality of interest and investigation even in the time of the ebbs. Even when things are difficult and we're really caught up in the suffering, times of suffering can pique my interest. In a way, those are the times that serve as a great wake-up call, because they're so intense and we can be so caught in different kinds of suffering. So then the question is: are we simply getting lost in the suffering, or can we really arouse an interest? What is going on in the mind now that is causing the suffering? We use that very intense situation to investigate our own minds.

For me, the times of suffering have in a way become the most insightful—more insightful often than times when everything's just flowing along smoothly and everything feels wonderful. If my mind is suffering, I want to know: what's the cause of that suffering? If the Buddha said the body can be afflicted but the mind can be at peace, then when my mind is not at peace, why?

So just one little thing—this could be a whole evening or course on this—but you mentioned when we're really caught in the grief of loss. I've thought a lot about this. And I think sometimes we get caught in the grief because we equate it or conflate it with love. Somehow—not necessarily the person who wrote the question, but it can

happen—people might feel, "Oh, if I'm not grieving, it means I'm not loving." And so in a certain way, we're feeding the grief because we don't want to let go of it, because it might be that in our minds we think letting go of the grief means letting go of the love.

I would just suggest an investigation of that assumption, because in my experience, these are two completely different emotions. In fact, when we come back to the love we feel for whatever it might be—another person or love of life—when we reconnect with the feeling of love, my experience is that in those moments, grief is not there, because they're really two different things. But we often have not investigated clearly how we feel with each of those emotions, and so we conflate them, and that's what can keep us caught in them. So again, this is a very big topic, but perhaps that reflection might be helpful.

A lot of the topics we've been discussing are very big topics. There's a saying that a philosophy that can be put in a nutshell deserves to be in a nutshell. And none of these questions lend themselves to small answers. They all beg to be unpacked.

And here's another one. Several questions address this, and it's something I'm confident Joseph has thought a lot about. On the one hand, there's this explicit claim that we need to cultivate a way of not clinging, of non-identification with the aggregates. And yet for people who may not be white men—who have identities that have historically and today are marginalized in a variety of different ways and different contexts—hearing "don't identify" lands differently. Because there's already a kind of stability from which someone like you or me is not identified, as opposed to an identity which is lived out in a very different way.

This is a really important question, and it comes up frequently because it points to something that really needs addressing. It has to do, I think, with a fundamental part of the Buddha's teachings when he talked about the two truths—the relative level of truth and the more ultimate level of truth. These are not two separate things. They're the same thing seen on different levels.

I'll give a simple example and then refer back to the specifics of the question. I'm holding up this cup. On the relative level, it's a cup—it has a certain shape, is made of certain materials, and I take care of it. I use it as a cup. On another level, if we looked at this under a high-power microscope, "cup" would disappear. It would be a whole other level of reality—no cup, just atoms and electrons and subatomic particles, a completely different level of reality.

What's interesting about understanding these two levels of truth is that first we need to attend to the relative, conventional level of our reality. So in the question that was raised—what is our racial identity or any other identity, and what are the implications for how we're living our lives and the challenges of whatever that particular identity is—the importance of finding stability in that identity is essential. On that level, it's vital. It's so clear now, the deleterious effects when people don't take into account these relative truths. This is the world we're living in. We need to honor and respect that.

At the same time, to the degree that we also understand the more ultimate level of ourselves in whatever personal situation we're in—if we can understand this more ultimate level, whether we think of it in terms of the changing aggregates or the momentary change, things continually disappearing and not clinging—to the degree that we have that understanding, then we actually can work with, manifest, and address all the concerns on the relative level with greater clarity and with greater ease.

So it's not a bypassing and it's not an ignoring. It's actually connecting with a deeper wisdom of the selflessness of it all, and then using that wisdom to engage on the relative, conventional level of understanding of self and other—whether it has to do with race or gender identification or whatever it may be. We can really work to understand all the dynamics at play on that level. But as I say, to the degree that we've touched at least a little bit the other level, then we can do it with greater freedom, with greater ease.

This was an expression of the Korean Zen master who started the Providence Zen Center. He used this phrase: "There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." There's no self on the ultimate level, but still we're manifesting in this world as particular beings. They're both true. We have to attend to both. And they're both true.

We're the same person. It's not that one truth is here and the other truth is over there. It's all here. And it just depends which level we happen to be paying attention to at a particular time.

So we work to integrate these two levels. We work to understand the dynamics of our conventional reality and all its challenges, even as we understand the essential selfless nature of it all. And I think this is really the heart of a mature spiritual practice—the union of these two, not the separation.

*

Perhaps the heart of a mature spiritual practice is a good note to end on. There were many pages of questions and comments that came in, a lot of really helpful, perceptive observations, along with some poetry and recommendations. Many people suggested we should have more conversations in this series, and Joseph and I did have a previous conversation on Nibbana in January. Perhaps we'll have another one at some point.

There are many people expressing their gratitude. I also wanted to thank those who have offered dāna. Dāna is the tradition that the institutions Joseph has started here in Barre follow for supporting teachers. In the early Indian languages of Sanskrit and Pali, *dāna* is related to our word "donation." It means a gift, or generosity.

There are many, many ways of offering dāna. It's the first virtue of the Bodhisattva. It allows us to relinquish things to which we're clinging and also support the immediate needs of others.

Sometimes we might get attached to a teacher, and certainly there's a lot of dāna that is given to teachers. But I want to make a suggestion that it's the institutions—such as the Insight Meditation Society, the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and various publishers—that support us all as Buddhists. They support the teachers in getting training, provide a framework for people to come and grow in the Dharma. There is great benefit in supporting institutions that make so much of what we do possible.

*

Often it's said that the Buddha would teach in a graduated way. He didn't start out, when he would first offer teachings, with selflessness or the Four Noble Truths. He led up to that. And it's said that he always started these graduated teachings with generosity.

I was just talking about this with somebody and they asked me, "Why do you think he did that?" In reflecting on it, it's because in addition to being of help to so many people, it makes us happy. Generosity is just this most wonderful quality that makes us happy. It's a wonderful practice.

I'll share with you—this is a practice I've done for many years now, and it's been a source of tremendous joy in my life. I've undertaken the practice that if I have the thought to give something—and it could be money, and often it is, but it could be many other things as well—if I have the thought to give, my practice is to do it. Not to second-guess myself, not to let the thought pass by.

It's so interesting to me. Going through my life, I'll have a thought, and then I do it. Clearly it's of some help to the recipient, but it's also this source of tremendous happiness in my own life. I would just encourage you to practice in this way. It's a beautiful thing for oneself and for others.

*

So let's just sit together for a couple of minutes. Again, settle in. Take a few deep breaths.

And let the breathing find its own rhythm.

A key element of meditation is relaxation. It's not forcing, not efforting. Let the body breathe in whatever way it does—and it can be changing breath to breath. Simply let all the sensations of the body breathing arise in the empty sky of your mind.

Let all the words settle. Relax into a place of ease.

May all the wholesome energy of our practice and our time together be dedicated to the welfare, happiness, and liberation of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 82

# Ask Joseph: Group Mentorship Program

Joseph Goldstein · 1h30

---

> *In this interactive Q&A session from a group mentorship program, Joseph Goldstein responds to over a hundred questions submitted by practitioners, addressing themes that resonate across all levels of practice. He begins with practical guidance for those struggling to maintain a daily meditation practice, suggesting a simple commitment to just five minutes daily as a way to overcome the resistance to disengaging from other activities.*
>
> *The heart of the talk explores concentration (samādhi) development, where Joseph shares tools from his own experience of starting with virtually no concentration ability. He introduces the Pāli terms vitakka (initial application) and vicāra (sustained attention), explaining how consciously arousing the intention to sustain attention for just half a breath at a time can transform one's practice. Additional techniques include softening the eyes to release unconscious tension, keeping eyes slightly open during scattered sittings, and understanding how to balance directed awareness with choiceless awareness.*
>
> *Joseph then addresses the profound challenge of maintaining equanimity amid overwhelming global suffering. He clarifies that equanimity—characterized by impartiality and spaciousness—is not indifference but rather the foundation for genuine compassion. By developing equanimity through practices like gaining perspective through history and cosmological reflection, we create the inner stability needed to open to suffering without being overwhelmed. This opening allows empathy to arise, which naturally leads to compassionate action. As Thich Nhất Hạnh expressed, 'compassion is a verb.' The session concludes with exploration of knowing the knowing—understanding how to become aware of awareness itself through reframing experience in the passive voice: 'sensations being known, thoughts being known.'*

It's great to be with all of you.

I thought it would be nice for us to sit for about ten minutes and get settled and embodied. Take a comfortable sitting posture. Maybe take a few deep breaths just as a way of really settling into the body, and then let the breath find its own natural rhythm.

Remember that it's not a breathing exercise—it's an exercise in awareness. We can allow the breath to come and go exactly in its own time, in its own rhythm, in its own changes. Just feel the sensations of each breath as it comes in and as it goes out. Really simple. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

If other sensations in the body become predominant and call your attention, simply open to the feeling of those sensations. Feel them, notice how they change. They may get stronger, they may get weaker, they may disappear. When nothing else is particularly predominant, we come back to the feeling of the breath.

Stay particularly alert for the appearance of thoughts or images in the mind. A soft mental note of "thinking" or "seeing" can be really supportive in being mindful of them.

You sent in over a hundred questions, so it was quite an interesting exercise reading through them all and choosing among them. Obviously we can't address all hundred this evening, but there were a few common themes, so I'll begin by reading some of the questions and then offering a hopefully helpful response.

One person wrote: "The one area where I clearly falter—I would say really struggle—is in my ability to sustain a meditation practice. In the beginning, I really worked hard on it, but over time, it has been the hardest thing for me. If you could say only one thing that could plant firmly in me the seed of my meditation practice 2.0, what would it be?"

Another asked: "How do we establish a commitment to regular daily practice? At the present time, I am only practicing in a sporadic way—that is, when it comes to mind while I'm doing another activity, such as sitting and listening to a program related to meditation."

And lastly: "Why is it so hard to make time to meditate when I know I want to do it?"

I think this is not an uncommon problem for people, especially those who've been practicing for a long time. You go through cycles of really strong commitment where you're doing it every day, and then maybe that begins to fall away and you find it hard to get reestablished.

In my experience, the challenge is not in the sitting itself. The challenge is in disengaging—the process of disengaging from what we've been doing. It's as if we are caught up or seduced by the particular activity we're engaged in, and we just find it hard to disengage.

I have this experience in another arena, and it's so obvious to me how it's working. For the past few years, I've been working with a personal trainer at a local health club. I meet with him every two weeks, and then I do a routine at home. For the routine at home, I can be busy doing a lot of stuff, and I know I have to do it because I report to him how it's been—there's that accountability. But it's so hard to sometimes break myself away from what I'm doing to go do the training exercises. What's amazing, though, is that as soon as I do it and as soon as I begin, I enjoy it and I'm glad that I'm doing it.

So why is there that hump to get over in terms of going from one activity to doing something we want to do, something we know is helpful, and yet it feels like there's this little obstacle?

A couple of suggestions with regard to sitting: if you find yourself in this situation, where you have the aspiration for daily practice but you find you're just not doing it, what I would suggest is making the commitment to at least sit for five minutes a day. Is there anyone who could not do that? Anyone could make that commitment and actually do it. If you go through the whole day and you haven't done it, before you get into bed at night, sit for five minutes.

What will happen almost assuredly is that once you're sitting—once you've gotten over that transition point, you've disengaged and you're sitting—almost assuredly you will sit longer than five minutes. But you don't have to. Your commitment is for the five minutes.

I think it won't take long until you are again back in the rhythm of just sitting every day without being so concerned about how long you're sitting—at least to begin with, at least as you're establishing the habit again of a daily practice.

It's so simple. However, you have to make the commitment. Even though it's a minimal one, you really have to embrace that resolve: "Okay, five minutes a day, I'm going to sit down and meditate." I think everything else will follow from that, because basically you're going to enjoy it and remember its value.

There were a whole bunch of questions about concentration, so this seems to be a common theme. I'll read some of them.

The first: "I sit daily for about 30 minutes. I've been practicing for five years. It doesn't seem like my concentration has deepened a lot. I keep returning to the object of meditation and immediately slipping away into thinking throughout the whole practice." Sound familiar? "Does it change during long retreats? Do I need to sit longer?"

Another: "I have been meditating for over 20 years and I have a consistent daily practice. Recently, though, I've had difficulty concentrating—constant thoughts—and missing the moments of peace and stillness I used to experience. I've had difficult times in the past with concentration, but I've always been able to find my way back. However, this persistent sense of unease and disconnection has been going on for a long time. And as I write this, I am realizing that it brings up fear, and I feel lost."

And the last one: "I've heard you say that in the beginning you struggled with concentration. I do also. Can you talk about the things that were most helpful?"

As you can tell, this is a common problem. First, it's important to recognize that concentration is an important, even essential part of our path, of our practice. The Buddha has said that without concentration, deeper wisdom doesn't arise. So we need to find some ways to strengthen that steadiness of mind, which is what concentration means—steadiness. The example given is of a candle in a windless place. The flame doesn't flicker. That's what we're trying to cultivate through a practice of concentration.

One thing to keep in mind is that for the purpose of insight, for the purpose of developing wisdom, it doesn't require a super amount of samādhi, of concentration. What's actually needed is well within all of our ability. As you probably know, concentration can be developed to very high levels, with a lot of powers that come from that and all of it. But what's needed for insight, what's needed for understanding, is just a base level of steadfastness of mind.

I'll mention a few different ways of strengthening it that have been helpful for me, because as one of the questions indicated, when I began my practice, I had zero concentration. I had studied philosophy in college. My mind loved to think. I went to India. I wanted to meditate. I would just sit down and think for the whole hour and enjoy it—which may have been one of the problems. The hour went quickly! But I wasn't getting anyplace in terms of developing that steadfastness of mind. So I know that if I can do it over these years of practice, anybody can, because I started from a very low level.

There are really two components to understanding the building blocks of concentration—two particular mental factors, which is Buddhist jargon for different qualities of mind. In the Pali language, they're called *vitakka* and *vicāra*. *Vitakka* means that quality of mind that connects with the object. It's like a bee going to a flower. The object is clearly in mind and we direct the mind to it. That's the first component. The second component, *vicāra*, is the sustained attention on the object. I call it connecting and sustaining.

It's helpful to keep in mind that this is what you're doing with each breath—to really have this clearly in mind. I'll give you a practical suggestion which made a big difference in my own practice. I changed the vocabulary I was using in developing concentration. Instead of using the language of "make more effort"—

I started using the language in my own mind of intentionality.

So for example, if we're working with the breath—or it could be a metta phrase, it's the same principle—we direct the mind to the object by connecting. Usually that's not the hard part. What I found really helpful was, right in the moment of connecting, giving a quick silent reminder to myself: sustain the attention for this half breath. Just having that intention, setting the intention each time of connecting and then reminding myself to sustain for this half breath.

I think it's helpful to do it for just half a breath at a time. Because if we have the idea, "I'm going to sit down and be with my breath for the next half hour," that's hopeless. But if we have the intention to be with the breath for just the in-breath, just the rising, then connect with the out-breath, the falling movement, and then arouse the intention to sustain—if you do that consciously, even for a few minutes, maybe three, four, five minutes where you're actively calling that intention to mind, I think you will notice that the mind gets into the habit of that close attention.

This is what we're really doing: we're training the quality of our attention. It doesn't take long for the mind to learn, at least for a period of time. So you do this for a few minutes and then you can just relax into a more easeful being with it. If you find the mind again beginning to wander, take another three or four minutes to arouse the intention with each breath.

Does this seem clear? It was super helpful for me. I applied this both with the breath and in the metta practice with each phrase, because I was finding as I was doing the phrases of loving-kindness, my mind would be there for the first phrase and then it would just start to wander as I was doing the others. It's the same principle, and it really helped keep the mind steady.

Another tool—and I'm going to offer a whole set of tools that you can play with, each of them, and see which work for you—is counting the out-breaths. Breathing in, and then on the out-breath: one. Breathing in, out-breath: two. One to ten or one to eight, whatever. That also can help steady the mind.

Something I've discovered quite recently in terms of strengthening concentration was suggested by an American monk named Vimalasiri. He emphasized a lot that with each breath, you soften the eyes. In the way he teaches it, it's almost like a rhythm of in and out, softening; in and out, softening. Whether you do it that way or not, just give some attention to softening, relaxing the eyes.

What I and many others have noticed is that even though when we're sitting with our eyes closed they don't really have a function in the process of being aware, still out of habit our eyes are very engaged. Even with eyes closed, we can feel them going in the direction of wherever we're attending. So often we're carrying a lot of tension in the eyes.

What I noticed as I began practicing this in a pretty regular way—softening the eyes throughout the sitting—was that the unnoticed tension in the eyes, even as I was watching the breath, was calling my attention really unconsciously and distracting me from the breath. That tension there actually weakens the power of our steadiness. When I softened the eyes regularly throughout the sitting, it was so much easier to simply let the mind settle in the place we're attending to, whether at the nostrils or the abdomen or the chest, wherever. The mind wasn't being distracted by this tension behind the eyes. Again, it seems like a very simple thing, but it made a big difference. I was surprised.

Another little trick: in those sittings when your mind is just out of control—you sit down, you're trying to be with the breath, and for whatever reason in that particular sitting it's just a barrage of thoughts, a flood of thoughts—what I found really helpful, actually somewhat miraculous, is to sit and keep the eyes open a slit. Interestingly, this is almost in contrast to what I just said about softening the eyes. So I would sit, feeling the breath, eyes open just a slit. And it was amazing to me that this cut through a lot of the wandering mind.

It does it for two reasons. One is that it's such an unnatural way of holding the eyes—open just the slightest amount, just a slit—the very unnaturalness of it keeps our attention there. And because our eyes are open even that little bit, we're connected to the reality of where we're actually sitting. There's less tendency to get caught up in our mind-created worlds of thought and image. Again, a simple thing, but I experienced a dramatic diminishment of the wandering mind.

So these are questions related to the sitting practice. There were many other questions dealing with how we are in the world, but these particular questions really are about our meditation practice.

So I practice Sayadaw U Pandita's meditation technique of following the graph of the breath, attempting to bring awareness to the beginning, middle, and end of each inhale and exhale. When my mind wanders off the object, I bring it back. Would you suggest at some point that I open my awareness and bring attention to changing objects? Do you think at some point it's important to focus on concentration, samatha meditation, as well as vipassanā? I've been meditating regularly for twelve years. Having done many types of meditation, I have a primary interest in concentration. Recently, I felt I had done enough concentration, but now that my practice no longer has a clear, simple goal, I have lost my motivation.

This question points to an important rhythm in practice to understand—both within a single sitting and also as we look over longer periods of time. It's really about how we interweave a directed awareness on a particular object, like the breath, with a more open choiceless awareness.

Concentration can actually develop in both ways. It comes from steadiness on a fixed object, but it also develops from steadiness on changing objects. This is called momentary concentration. When we are mindful of changing objects steadily, that itself builds steadiness and concentration of mind.

So we want to find an intuitive balance. I think if you keep this in mind—these two ways, directed awareness and choiceless awareness—and hold that frame in mind, over time you're going to be able to intuit as you're sitting: which is most important right now?

For example, you sit down and you're feeling the breath with a really directed awareness. After some time, the mind may feel quite steady on it. You could either continue and strengthen the fixed object concentration, or at that time—and I would trust your intuition and explore for yourself—open it up to a more choiceless awareness, being aware of whatever arises: different sensations in the body, thoughts, sounds, emotions, images. Then you've segued into momentary concentration.

As you're doing that, maybe at a certain point you feel like you're getting spaced out, losing the steadiness, getting lost in a lot of thoughts. Then bring the mind back to the fixed object concentration. It's not that one is better or more important than the other. They're just two different approaches, and we need to interweave them in our practice.

This can also be done over longer periods of time. I've been practicing many years now, and there are times when I've settled in with a strong momentum into an open choiceless awareness. That's what I'm doing in every sitting, and it seems to be going pretty well. At other times—and I'm doing this actually right now in my practice and

have been for the last few months—for whatever reason, the thought came: I think I want to deepen the fixed object concentration, deepen the samādhi in that way. So I've taken a few months, and I'm still doing it, where I'm just doing meditation on the breath.

For those of you who have practiced a while and have a little more experience, you can really get a sense of what will be most valuable for you in any particular sitting, or over longer periods of time.

One of the images I use to hold all of these suggestions is that what we're developing is a toolbox of different skillful means. As you practice, especially over many years, you learn—if you're paying attention to what works for you—how to use the different tools at different times. I would encourage you in your exploration of developing concentration and insight to begin to explore these different ways in a really mindful way, so you get familiar with which tool to use, which method or strategy to employ at any particular time. They're both helpful, and they both serve to strengthen the mindfulness and strengthen the concentration.

So this is the section on the meditation practice itself. As you can see, a lot had to do with the development of concentration and getting oneself to sit in the first place, and then learning how to modulate directed awareness versus choiceless awareness.

There were a whole bunch of questions about how our practice can help us navigate the many challenges facing us in the world. I'll just read a few of them.

"I am experiencing overwhelming grief. I wake up and simply feel enormous grief for everything I see and feel around me. The enormous litany, to name a few: climate change, abounding unlivable poverty, patriarchal governments all over the world destroying civilizations, wars unending with annihilation now on agendas. That's just the broad strokes. Advice would greatly be appreciated to be able to somehow be with the enormity of it all."

I think we can all relate to that.

Someone else wrote in: "How do you suggest I maintain equanimity in the face of almost daily news of damage to the earth that is causing so much suffering towards creatures? Is it sufficient to focus on advancing my personal path of liberation while the earth burns around me? What course of action would you recommend at this time in our history?"

And the last one, though there were many in this vein: "The burning question of this mind since May was, is it possible to have too much equanimity? Over the course of the past several months, what I realized was that my question isn't about whether or not I can be too equanimous, but how do I address issues that no longer cause me to be reactive but still have consequences that will affect me. It's sometimes strange navigating the world without the anger that consumed me for fifty-plus years."

These are really powerful questions. Given what's going on in the world, it can be overwhelming. The intensity of the news cycle—twenty-four-seven news bombarding us all the time—makes it really hard to know how to hold it, or even if it's possible to hold it. So the question is how to find balance with all this. I think we're all experiencing it to some extent or another.

There are two key elements that enhance our ability to hold what's going on—the magnitude of the dukkha, the suffering in the world—without getting overwhelmed. These two elements are equanimity and compassion.

What's interesting to me is that most people get inspired by the thought of compassion, the feeling of compassion. It's a word that uplifts us, and we all mostly resonate with wanting to be compassionate. Equanimity doesn't have quite the same PR. Even in the worldly news, we can hear stories of compassion and they inspire us. But how often do we read about equanimity in the news? Probably not that often. It's almost like it's not even a cultural value. It doesn't come up that much.

And yet, equanimity is the foundation for so much. It is the foundation for skillful, compassionate action. It allows us to be with what's going on without drowning in what's going on.

I want to talk a little bit about the nature of equanimity, because I think in our world, hopefully it's discussed a lot on retreats, but probably not as much as compassion. So let me describe what the actual mind state of equanimity is.

What characterizes the equanimous mind is the quality of impartiality—that is, seeing things and situations in their totality. It can be likened to space that holds everything. Space is not partial, holding some things and not others. So the equanimous mind has that quality of openness, of spaciousness, of non-reactivity. It's just holding and seeing what's there without jumping to conclusions right away, without getting caught up in conditioned reactivity.

But what's really important to understand about equanimity—and this is key—is that it doesn't mean non-discernment. We can have this spacious, impartial, non-reactive mind and still be seeing clearly what's what. We can see what's wholesome. We can

see what's unwholesome. We can see what leads to peace. We can see what leads to suffering. But in the equanimous mind, to start with, we're open to seeing the whole picture, trying to understand things from as many different perspectives and sides as possible. It's clear, it's open, it's seeing what's what.

This quality of equanimity, this openness that includes discernment—this is really the foundation for the arising of wisdom, for seeing how best to respond to any particular situation. It's like equanimity gives us the possibility of asking ourselves, "What is the most effective way of responding to this situation of distress or suffering?" It might be our own suffering, it might be people we're close to, it might be the situation in the world. Whatever domain or arena we're considering, when there's equanimity—when we're not just jumping in with our reactivity—it allows for clear seeing and real wisdom. What will be effective in dealing with this situation?

We may feel compassionate, and that feeling motivates us to jump in and do something. But if we're not seeing clearly, sometimes our action just causes more confusion, because it's not based on wisdom.

So how do we find the space of equanimity? This is in the midst of all the huge problems that are in the world and maybe in our own lives. How do we find equanimity, that place of balance, of impartiality?

There are a few tools and reflections that I've found really helpful, because it's very easy to be thrown off balance by the magnitude of everything that is going on.

The first reflection, which I think is helpful in every situation, whether those of suffering or not, is remembering that we are not the center of the universe and that we are not in control of most things that are happening. Most things are outside of our control. To just have a realistic understanding of that—I'll give you a very mundane example of this, but it could be applied in much more significant contexts.

Sometime recently I was at the airport and the plane was delayed for hours. It was so interesting to watch people's responses. Some people were pretty chilled out and other people were so reactive, taking it personally, complaining to the airline staff. But this was a situation completely outside of one's control, delayed for whatever reasons they were delayed. If we don't take it personally and we understand that it's outside of control, it's really easy to just relax back and do what we have to do with an even mind.

This can get a little trickier when we're facing a really big problem in the world and we want to do something. But the first consideration is: is this something within some degree of control? Is this an arena in which, in whatever even small way, I can have impact? Just to determine that. Because if there isn't, it would be better to address situations where we can have impact. Having this discernment can be really helpful.

Another thing that really helps with equanimity is simply seeing the bigger picture. I do this in a variety of ways. One particular way is really effective if I'm involved in some kind of personal difficult interaction. Sometimes at night, I just go out and look up at the stars. That's all. Just looking up at the stars and reminding myself of the magnitude, the unimaginable magnitude of this universe. And then I think about my own little life having this own little difficulty, and having that larger perspective kind of helps my heart relax. Instead of being so bound up in the drama of it all, it just makes more space. It doesn't mean not addressing it, but it means creating more inner space, more equanimity with which we can deal with it.

Something that helps with equanimity for me in larger societal problems is reading history. I'm a big fan of reading history because it just provides a perspective. A little while ago, I was listening to one of those great books courses—really interesting—on the rise and fall of civilizations before Alexander the Great. These are thousands of years ago, three or four thousand years ago. And it was a history of civilizations arising and becoming powerful, and then for a variety of causes beginning to decline and disappear, and a new one arises. This is just the sway of history. And we are part of that same cycle. We may think that civilization as we know it, this is how it's going to be from now on, but it's not. Just like everything else, it's following the law of change. Just remembering, even as I think about all the problems facing the world today based on the current civilizations at play, remembering the larger cycles of history enables the mind to feel a little more peace with it, a little more equanimity.

And then there's geological time and cosmological time. Are you getting the idea? Enlarging the perspective. Because we can be so caught up and so tied into our own little world. Even when we're dealing with very real problems, we can have a very contracted energy in dealing with it all. And it's not helpful. If we can create a little more spaciousness in our minds, a little more balance, a little more equanimity, it actually allows for effective action.

This is where compassion comes into play. The equanimity that we can develop through all the various things I mentioned creates that space. People might think, "Oh, well, we've become so equanimous and so spacious, we become indifferent." But indifference in Buddhist language is the near enemy of equanimity, meaning it looks like it, but it's very different. Indifference is pulling back.

Equanimity is a holding of everything. And in that place of holding, that's precisely the space out of which compassion can arise.

So this is an interesting thing to examine in your own experience and lives. What is the cause of compassion? It's a conditioned state of mind. What are the conditions which bring it about? And here we can see the power of equanimity in giving rise to compassion. Because compassion arises from our willingness to open to the suffering that's there, our willingness to come close to the suffering. It's that coming close which can actually open that wellspring of compassion within us.

But this is not always so easy. There are many times when we don't want to be with the pain and suffering, whether it's our own or somebody else's, because it can be painful, uncomfortable, or overwhelming. And so there are times when we think, "No, I can't deal with this, it's too much." So the practice of compassion really is strengthened by the strength of our equanimity, where we're not pulling back. We're there, our minds steady enough to hold, to be with the suffering that's present. And again, it could be our own. Are we compassionate with it? Or do we just want to get rid of it? Do we have a lot of aversion to it? Or are we open to the innumerable situations of suffering in the world? Can we let it in?

This is a practice. It's not that we have this ability or we don't. You can probably relate to this in your own meditation practice. When you're sitting and you begin to feel some pain and discomfort, is your first reaction, "Oh good, let me be with this. This is a chance to come close"? Probably not. Probably the first reaction is, "I don't like this, I want to get rid of this." But over time, in our meditation, we learn, we practice—oh no, it's okay. It's okay to feel the pain of it. It's okay to feel the suffering. And so we develop that resilience to actually experience what is present.

I emphasize this because it's important to realize that it is a practice, this ability to come close. Sometimes it will be stronger and sometimes not. So we have to be responsive to what our actual state is in the moment. There are times when the suffering, either personally or in the world, is just too much for us. It's overwhelming. We don't have the capacity to be with it. That's the time to back off. There's nothing wrong with that. It's an appropriate response when we're off balance, when we don't have the capacity. So we back off, we attend to other things, we regain a little stability. And then we

practice again, moving into it—okay, can I hold a little bit? Do you understand this movement? Become close to suffering, it gets too much, we pull back a little bit, we gain a little strength, we come close again. And over time, our ability to hold the suffering in the world becomes really strong.

There are some striking examples of this. Someone who always comes to mind in this manifestation of compassion is the Dalai Lama. The suffering of the people of Tibet, his own suffering, and the stories he endlessly hears about the atrocities that go on—and yet he has this amazing capacity to hold it, to feel it, and to have a compassionate response in whatever way is possible for him in that moment. I really hold him as an example of what's possible, and we can move in that direction.

One last piece on this. We could talk about this for hours, but given the state of the world, these really feel like important questions. Establishing and practicing, cultivating the equanimity which allows us to be with the suffering, practicing opening to it, coming close to it—as we come close, what develops in us is a quality of empathy. Because we're not shutting ourselves off, we can begin to feel what other people are going through.

And the empathy then leads to compassion. And compassion involves the motivation to do something, to act. This just goes back to what I was saying before: equanimity is not indifference. It's the foundation for opening so that we can respond and take action.

Thich Nhat Hanh had a wonderful phrase. He said, "Compassion is a verb." I love that because it's not just empathy, although empathy may be a part of it. Compassion is that feeling of "Okay, what can I do? How can I help?"

I love that phrase, which was actually the title of a book: *How Can I Help?* That phrase comes to my mind a lot as I'm navigating both my own inner life and my personal relationships and my relationship to the world. I feel like it's a mantra of compassion: "How can I help?" And with equanimity, we have some clear seeing of what we can actually do.

One last little thing on this. If you're interested, there's a documentary called *A Small Act* about how sometimes even very small actions can have huge consequences. It tells the story of a small act undertaken by a middle-aged Swedish woman that rippled out in the most amazing ways. It was really inspiring to me because it shows that even small acts of compassion can have really big consequences.

There's a lot more we could explore here, but I was really moved by these questions because they are so meaningful in these times. How do we deal in a dharmic way with the magnitude of what's going on?

The next question: "After years of practice, I've recently been inspired by teachings on being aware of the witness, or knowing the knower. Can you give meditation instruction for transitioning from knowing the breath to knowing the knower, and any words of advice on holding this object of meditation? I feel I can experience it for a moment at a time when renunciation is easy and strong, but surprisingly, even the pleasure of meditation moves me off of it."

Knowing the knower. In recent years, especially, a lot of teachers within the Vipassana tradition have been emphasizing things like resting in awareness or knowing the knower. I'd like to clarify a few concepts and make some suggestions.

First, to clarify: it's not really knowing the knower or knowing the witness. Rather, it's knowing the knowing or knowing the witnessing. Because as soon as we use the language of "knower" or "witness," we are reinforcing the sense of self—the sense of someone there who is knowing, who is witnessing. Do you follow? So we want to move away from the creation of that observer toward the understanding that there is a process of observing, of knowing, of witnessing. That's just another impersonal faculty of the mind. It does not imply a self who's doing it. It's just this process of knowing, of witnessing, of observing.

So then the question becomes: we've clarified that aspect, but how can we settle into being mindful of that process of knowing?

One model for understanding this is recognizing that what we call our lives is really a moment-to-moment pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. That's what's going on. That's the basic thing happening that is our life. Our life is not something apart from that. This is what we call our life. It's just moment after moment—knowing a sight, knowing a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, a thought, an emotion.

The Buddha described this in a very short discourse. He called this "the all." Because just in those six phrases, it describes the totality of our experience: knowing of sight, of sound, of smell, of taste, of sensation, of mind objects. Is there anybody who experiences something other than that? It's pretty interesting. We think our lives are so complex, but it's really only six things that are ever happening.

Sometimes I like to think of it as though our life is a six-piece chamber orchestra, and our life is the music being played. It's just different combinations. Of course, mind objects can cover a lot—thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations of the body—but it's just these six things.

What's really happening moment after moment is simply this: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. It can be interesting in your practice to see if you can hone in on this experience, because it simplifies things amazingly. And mostly, smells and tastes, except in certain circumstances, are not predominant. So really, it's only four things that are ever happening. Given how we think of our lives as being so complex, I love the fact that it comes down to these four simple experiences. That's just my own particular delight in seeing that.

So knowing an object—these two, the knowing and the object, are distinct but inseparable. For example, the knowing of a sound in a moment of hearing: the sound is the object, consciousness knows the sound, but they are arising together. We cannot separate them, yet they're distinguishable. They're two different aspects of a singular experience—the experience of hearing or seeing.

Let me give you an example of how things can be inseparable and yet distinct. Can you see what I'm holding up? It's just the back of this remote. But when you're looking at it, there are two different things going on: there's the color and there's the form, the shape. These are two distinct things. Color is not shape, and shape is not color. But they're inseparable. The color is in a shape, and the shape has a color. This helps us understand that knowing and object are inseparable but distinct.

When we understand this and we begin to have enough momentum in our practice —where we're not simply struggling to come back to be with the breath, where we've built up a certain momentum and it's kind of rolling along—that's the time when we can really begin to explore these two aspects. It's kind of like foreground and background. In each moment, both are present: there's the sound and the knowing of it. They're both present, but one of them—either the object or the knowing—will be in the foreground of our attention, and the other will be there but more in the background.

In the exploration of knowing the knowing, when there's enough momentum in practice where it's just rolling along, you can choose to emphasize either the object or sometimes prompt yourself: "Know the knowing." It's very interesting to do this, and also to understand that generally the object will be more predominant because it's more tangible. The knowing aspect of the mind is immaterial; it's not a material phenomenon. So it's much more subtle, and generally it's the objects of which we're most aware.

But what's interesting—and this is right out of the classical texts—is that as the object becomes clearer, the consciousness knowing the object becomes clearer. I found this to be true in my practice. As it deepened and the steadiness was there and the mindfulness was present more and more effortlessly, the object got so clear that it's as if that clarity opened up the mindfulness of the knowing aspect.

Are we still together? This is getting into more subtle aspects of the practice, but it's really interesting.

Another way to tune into the knowing—and I've talked about this a lot over the years, so many of you have probably heard me say this a million times—but it really changed my practice. And that is reframing my languaging of what I was doing in the passive voice. Normally we language things in the active voice: "I'm hearing," or "I'm seeing," or "I'm hearing a sound," "I'm seeing a sight." The passive voice is "a sound being known," "a sensation being known," "a thought being known."

I first stumbled upon this in the walking practice, because it was really easy to do. The sensations of walking were so tangible and effortless. You're just walking, feeling the sensations of the movement. And I noticed: "Oh, sensations being known." The power of that passive voice is that it takes the subject out of it. There's no self involved there linguistically. It's just sensation being known, thought being known, sound being known—and it's all happening effortlessly and spontaneously. Because we're framing it in the language of being known,

that language is kind of a prompt for us to be aware of the knowing. Because we're referring to it in the very way we're languaging our experience. This being known, this being known, this being known. It automatically starts to turn our attention to the knowing aspect, even as we're aware of what it is that's being known.

If you haven't tried this, I encourage you to experiment with it, because as I said, it transformed my practice and made it so much more easeful. There was no longer a me trying to do something. It was just things being known, and it was happening all by itself.

Once you get into that rhythm, you could language it for a little bit until the language is embedded in how you're experiencing it, but then you don't need the language anymore. You're just in that mode of things being known. And then the question arises: known by what? This really directs the attention to an investigation of the nature of awareness, the nature of knowing. It's just another way of dropping into this.

This exploration of the nature of awareness, the nature of knowing, is a very interesting part of our practice. When it feels appropriate for you in your practice, these are certain ways of exploring it.

Someone asked about methods for being aware of awareness, noting that they're finding this difficult. I think it's exactly what I just expressed. I was using the term knowing rather than awareness, but it's the same thing—even though in a philosophical discussion we could get into whether they're the same thing, how they're different, how we're using the term awareness. But for the purpose of experiencing this, everything I said about becoming mindful of the knowing is exactly the same as becoming mindful of the awareness, becoming aware of awareness.

Maybe just one other prompt that could be used—a simple prompt. You're sitting, and you remind yourself to know that you're knowing. Because the knowing is there. It's not something hiding under a rock that we have to find. It's there in every moment, knowing an object, knowing an object. It's always there. And just a simple prompt—know that you're knowing—will direct your attention to that aspect of the process.

Someone else asked whether equanimity is the same as letting go. I would say it's the same as letting go of reactivity. And in some way, it does imply a mind that is not holding on to any one particular thing, because it's that quality, really, of openness. That's a nice way of understanding the dimension of equanimity—that we're really not holding onto anything at that point.

Another question came in about the relationship of solitude with meditation. I love solitude, or certainly periods of it. Our culture is so speedy, with so much input, and we are just overwhelmed energetically by it all. To have periods of solitude is so healing and so restful. Even when in the solitude—for example, if we were on a retreat, maybe a solitary retreat, a home retreat or wherever—just the silence and the solitude, even when difficult things may be coming up, creates the space for them to come up and out. We're releasing so many levels of tension—physical, emotional, mental. We're giving space for the release of all that.

I think solitude is just one of the most beautiful and perhaps misunderstood or undervalued aspects of a life.

And of course, some people who are drawn to solitude in a big way might go off and live in a cave. There are stories of these great yogis spending fifty years in such practice. But I think for most of us, it's not necessarily that extreme. Rather, it's about having periods of silence and solitude, which serve as such a support for understanding, for clarity, for simply finding some inner peace.

Can you tell I'm giving a plug for it? It might be challenging, but I think it's worth considering. Each of you has your own life situations and circumstances, so you would need to figure out for yourself: Is there a way I can build in some periods of this? Maybe it's half a day, or a day, or a week, or whatever. But I would really encourage you to practice that kind of disengaging from the busyness of our lives. It's a beautiful thing. It's a very poetic space. Our hearts just open, and we become so much more attuned to what's going on.

Where does gratitude fit in with the Brahma Viharas? Well, I think it could be seen as a quality of metta, of loving-kindness. But in a way, it has its own special quality. Sayadaw U Pandita once said that gratitude is one of the most beautiful and rare qualities in the world. All of us have so much to be grateful for in our lives. Even when there are difficulties and challenges, a basic principle of Buddhist understanding is the interconnectedness of everything. Thich Nhat Hanh really emphasized this, using so many examples. If you consider the food we eat and try to trace back all the beings involved in allowing that food to be in front of us, an innumerable number of beings are part of that chain.

When we understand this and cultivate an appreciation and gratitude for the obvious blessings in our lives, it becomes a wonderful practice to express it, even to ourselves. One of the things I do, for example, is the simplest gratitude practice—totally simple. Sometimes I'll go out at night and just look up at the stars and the sky and the immensity of it all. Spontaneously, I'll have this thought, and I'll often say it out loud: "Thank you for the blessings of my life." That's all. It's not directed to any particular being. It's just to the universe. Simply, thank you for the blessings of my life. And it feels so connected and so heart-opening.

I think gratitude is a really beautiful quality to actually practice, in whatever way resonates with you. Don't underestimate the power of it, because it creates a beautiful heart, that particular quality.

May the merit of our time together be shared by all beings everywhere. May it be for the welfare and happiness, the peace and liberation of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 83

# Ask Joseph: A Group Mentorship Program

Joseph Goldstein · 1h49

> *In this interactive Q&A session, Joseph Goldstein offers practical guidance on a range of meditation challenges that practitioners commonly face. He begins by addressing how to work with overwhelming experiences during moment-to-moment meditation, emphasizing the importance of attending to whatever is predominant and distinguishing between noting and noticing.*
>
> *The talk delves deeply into working with the greedy mind, exploring how taṇhā (craving) operates as described in the Four Noble Truths. Joseph shares personal stories about the persistence of desire and introduces the practice of small moments of renunciation—exercising the 'wise no' as a path to freedom. He offers a powerful contemplation: comparing the mind's anticipatory pleasure before gratification with its state ten minutes after, revealing how little lasting satisfaction desire actually brings.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is Joseph's teaching on doubt (vicikicchā) as the most problematic hindrance, explaining how it masquerades as wisdom and removes us from practice entirely. He provides clear guidance on recognizing one's particular doubting voice. The discussion of shame and guilt illuminates how shame can contain wisdom about our actions' consequences, while guilt functions as an 'ego trip' that strengthens self-view. Joseph introduces the concept of self as an 'emergent property' of the basic elements—real but not really real—offering fresh insight into anattā (non-self). The session concludes with compassionate guidance on navigating aging and cognitive decline with mindfulness and grace.*

Good to see all of you.

As Catherine said, we'll sit for maybe just five or seven minutes since there were a lot of questions to get through. So take a comfortable seat. Simply settle into the body, feeling yourself sitting. Maybe take a deep breath or two. Then let the breath find its own natural rhythm. Softening the eyes, relaxing the shoulders. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. Be aware of thoughts as they appear in the mind, and simply notice them come and go without getting involved.

There were a lot of interesting questions, and I learned a lot from reflecting on many of them. So thank you for sending them in.

The first question: "In moment-to-moment meditation, I can get overwhelmed by the confluence of thought—like being angry at someone—a physical sensation such as neck discomfort, and then the pressure of trying to note whether something is pleasant or unpleasant. I get lost and just come back to the breath, but I feel like I'm falling short of the moment-to-moment meditation practice. Are there any steps you recommend?"

I think this is not an uncommon situation where sometimes it feels like so much is going on at the same time that it can get confusing, and we don't quite know where to put our attention. A couple of simple suggestions:

The basic guideline for practice and what we should be paying attention to is to become mindful of whatever is predominant in the moment. Even if it feels like many things are happening, the mind will be drawn to one aspect or another. We can just note the predominant object moment after moment without trying to figure it out by ourselves. The mind will automatically be drawn to the predominant experience.

This also points to an interesting distinction. Many of you are probably familiar with the tool we often suggest of mental noting, where we put just a very soft whisper of a note onto the experience as a way of strengthening our connection to it. For example: in, out, pain, tingling, vibration, hearing, thinking—just noting moment after moment. Many people find this helpful either to use throughout the whole sitting or just for certain shorter periods of time to refine our perception.

But sometimes things start happening too quickly, and the noting feels cumbersome and too slow. So it's helpful to make the distinction in one's mind between noting and noticing. The key point is to notice what's happening. You could think of noticing as being a synonym for mindfulness. The noticing is what's important, and the mental label is simply a support for that when it's helpful, when it feels appropriate.

Be with what's predominant. Even when there are a lot of different things going on, one thing will be in the foreground, another will be in the background. And if many things are moving quickly, just settle into the noticing aspect rather than trying to note.

Next question: How to work with a greedy mind? Does anybody have a greedy mind?

One thing to keep in mind is that having a greedy mind or noticing a greedy mind does not mean that we're a greedy person. Sometimes people might conflate those two. A greedy mind really is simply referring to that mental quality or mental factor of craving—the craving for something. That's what the greedy mind means.

Craving in the mind, as most of you probably know, is a deeply conditioned pattern, which is the cause of a lot of suffering in our lives. The Buddha talked of craving as the Second Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth is the truth of dukkha, of suffering or unease or stress. Then he said, what's the cause of that? The fundamental, underlying cause is craving. The Third Noble Truth is the end of craving, and the Fourth Noble Truth, of course, is the Eightfold Path.

Understanding that this force of craving, or greed in this sense, is really deeply conditioned in all of us means it's going to be there for a while. It's said that craving, sense desire, is not uprooted until the third stage of enlightenment. So for most of us, we should make some friends with it because it's going to be around.

How to work with it? Almost anybody who's practiced will have quite a lot of experience with this. First, it's to realize that it is a very strong force. I'll share one little story to indicate how even about something very small, this craving or greed can be so persistent. I was doing a self-retreat in my home, doing walking meditation, walking back and forth, and then the thought came into my mind: oh, a cup of tea would be nice.

Oh, wanting, wanting. I kept on walking. Five steps later: "Oh, a cup of tea, that would really be nice." No, I just saw it, let it go. Another five steps: "Cup of tea, cup of tea, cup of tea." I don't know how long it went on. And I was getting amused by it. But it was really persistent—until at a certain point, "Oh, cup of tea," and I went for the cup of tea.

It reminded me of a blade of grass pushing up through concrete: a really small thing, but with a big force behind it. So it's to understand that and to appreciate the power of this force in the mind, which is why it's so important to begin to get a handle on it, to begin to learn how to work with it in different ways.

One of the ways that I work with it—and I find it challenging, but also very rewarding, even with these simple little desires—is just to take small moments, little moments of renunciation. For Westerners, renunciation doesn't often inspire people. It feels like we tend to conflate it with deprivation. But actually there's a wonderful aspect to renunciation: that ability to see what's there and have the strength to say, "No, I'm not going to do that. No, this isn't so skillful."

In a lot of meditation instructions and environments, there's so much emphasis on the yes. Yes, allow, accept—which is really a key point of the whole meditation practice, to open in that way, to say yes to what's happening. However, the wise no is equally im-

portant. And this is not the no of aversion. This is the no of wisdom. It's seeing something arise in the mind and realizing, "No, this is not so helpful, it's not so useful." But I don't think we've exercised the no muscle very much.

I think it's really worth doing, even about very small things, like a cup of tea. And obviously, with things like that, there's nothing wrong with having a cup of tea—that's not the message. But it's the ability to see the force of desire, the force of craving; that's what we're saying no to. And so that's hitting on something fundamental to having a life of greater ease and greater harmony: the ability to say this, the ability to actually have that momentary renunciation.

There are a million situations where we could practice this. A very big arena might be in just paying attention to the patterns of our speech. I see a lot of things arise in my mind. And one particular kind of speech—I mean, in some situations it's obvious to refrain from lying or harsh speech. But one of the places I love to practice this renunciation is in the categories the Buddha talked of as useless speech. When we're about to say something and it's just completely useless, and yet the impetus to just let it spill out—I've found it both helpful and empowering to see it in the mind before speaking and say, "No, I don't have to do that."

One of the benefits of practicing these small moments of renunciation is that it's actually a conservation of energy. And we can feel it. Whenever I can actually say, "No, I don't need to do that," it feels like a victory over Mara, the tempter. "No, I'm not going to buy into this." There is a genuine feeling of empowerment with strengthening that place in our mind.

So these are ways of working with the greedy mind. One other really interesting thing to look at—and this is actually fascinating. When you're going along and you have a desire for something, anticipating the pleasure of it, it's really the anticipation of the pleasure that motivates us to act. It's not even often the thing itself, but the idea that, "Oh, this is going to be pleasurable." And that's why we go for it.

A really interesting exploration would be to look at your mind when that desire first comes and that anticipatory pleasure arises. Make that the object of your awareness, your mindfulness, so you really get a sense of the force that's driving the action. And you can really feel it: "Oh, yeah, that would feel good." Then, after you gratify whatever it is—whether it's a cup of tea or a good meal or whatever the object of gratification is—let's say five minutes afterwards, or ten minutes afterwards, you've had the cup of tea, you've done whatever it is that you were enticed to do. Ten minutes or so afterwards, check out your mind again and compare the difference between your mind before

the action when you're being seduced by the anticipatory pleasure, and watch your mind 10 minutes after you've experienced it. The question you might ask is: does it make the slightest bit of difference?

So often, after I've had the cup of tea or whatever it was, 10 minutes after it's over, it did not bring me lasting happiness. It was a moment's hit—it felt good. And then it's gone, and it really didn't make any difference at all whether I had gone for it or not.

But please don't believe me. I would really invite you to check it out for yourself, because the conditioning of desire and craving is so strong. What I've found is that it's mostly in looking ahead that it's so seductive. When I look back on the fulfillment of many of these little desires, it didn't mean anything. This understanding, based on really looking for yourself—again, it's not believing it as a theory—just taking some interest in your mind before and after. This is simply a way of exploring and working with the greedy mind. It gets pretty interesting because you're working with a very fundamental power, a very fundamental habit of mind.

One could go on. I could go on a long time talking about the greedy mind, but we'll move on.

Here are some related questions: What is the best thing to do when you experience doubt about your meditation experience? Specifically, doubting that your experience of awareness is nothing more than something fabricated or interpreted through a concept you place on top of your experience—similar to how someone might believe in a religious idea such as God or heaven and attribute experiences to that idea because they've read and been taught about it. Another question: What happens when you lose faith in the practice or in the idea of freedom? And finally: Are the benefits of a long-term meditation practice directly proportional to the number of hours spent meditating, or is there a plateau?

All of these questions really have to do with the unfolding trajectory of practice over many years. I know many of you have been practicing for a long time, so you'll be familiar with this. There are many, many ups and downs, as you know. One day the sitting will be great—calm, concentrated, body at ease. The very next sitting can be restless, boring, filled with thinking. It just goes up and down like that.

What I would say is that with all the ups and downs over time, the slope of the curve is going up. After five years of practice or ten years of practice, even though there are still ups and downs, we can see the progress and the deepening of mindfulness and concentration. But it doesn't mean that progress is linear in the sense of just moving upward. It's up and down and up and down, yet the slope is going up.

And then there are times when we do hit plateaus. I've experienced that many times over all these years. We're going along, things seem to be going fine, and then it's like we hit the doldrums, and it just feels like we're going over the same stuff again and again. That's when doubt can arise, and we can get discouraged during these times of plateau in our meditation.

At one time, during my India days, I was on a retreat and I was in one of these places. It just felt like nothing much was happening. I started to get discouraged, judging myself, judging my practice. Then I saw what was going on in my mind, and I gave myself a little talking to. I said, "Joseph, just sit and walk, sit and walk—that's your job. Let the Dharma take care of the rest."

It was a kind of surrender to the Dharma, surrender to the unfolding, knowing that—and I'm going to anthropomorphize this a little bit—the Dharma knew better than I did how things should unfold. If I could just trust that, and do my part, which was simply to sit and walk and sit and walk, it was so helpful. I stopped all the self-judgment, I stopped the doubt. I just sat and walked. After some time, I got out of the doldrums and could feel the practice unfolding again.

So it's important to recognize those times and to recognize the doubts or discouragement that might come up—and not buy into it. We really just need to continue doing the practice and have that trust that the Dharma will lead us onward, which it does. I've seen it in myself and I've seen it in thousands of yogis. So I have a lot of confidence in that.

It's something like—have you ever walked in a labyrinth?

You're going toward the center, and then the labyrinth path leads you away from the center, and then around a little bit, and then toward the center, away from the center. It could well feel that in those times when the path seems to be leading away from the center—uh-oh, what did I do wrong? But really, we just have to keep walking because the path is leading to the center through all those changes of direction. Maybe if you can keep that in mind, it will encourage you just to stay with it.

But then the question is, at those times when we do get caught up in doubt—doubt about ourselves, our ability, doubt about the practice—how do we work with it? Of all the hindrances—desire and aversion and sleepiness, restlessness—doubt is the most problematic. Because with all the others, we can learn how to see through them. If there's desire, okay, there's a certain filter on the mind, but we can still be connected to

the object. But when there's doubt, that removes us from the ball field. We're not even playing anymore. We've really just stopped our practice if we don't know how to relate to doubt skillfully.

The image in the texts to describe the doubting mind is so apt. It's described as the thorny mind. When doubt is persistent, it's just like a thorn that keeps jabbing—very unpleasant, very discouraging. Often, if people don't know how to work with it, they give up because of the doubt. But it is very workable if we know how to do it.

The trick is seeing through that very wise-sounding voice in the mind, because that's the voice of doubt. It's very skillful. It's a skillful actor, very compelling. So we believe it. "Oh, this is not the right time for me. Oh, this isn't working. Oh, this and that." And it's talking to us in such a convincing way that we believe what it's saying and we are not recognizing it as doubt. We think it's wisdom.

This is the key point: doubt comes masquerading as wisdom. But if we understand that and we see it, simply by recognizing these different kinds of thoughts of doubt—"I see you. I recognize you as being doubt"—when we can do that, then we're no longer seduced into the belief that what it's saying is true. We just see it as the doubting mind, another thought arising and passing in the moment, and we go on with our practice. It does not have that compelling force in mind, but it takes recognizing it.

What I would suggest for those of you for whom doubt comes up from time to time: see if you can become very precise about the particular kinds of doubt that each of you have. For each of us, the doubt may be expressed in a slightly different way. We have to recognize what our own particular doubting voice is saying, and to recognize it so clearly that you could almost write it out in a sentence. Just as a few examples: "The practice isn't working." Or "I can't do this." Or whatever it might be. Because if we can recognize the doubt really clearly, that helps us to recognize it as doubt. And then we just note "doubt, doubt, doubt," and it has really lost all its power.

Does this seem clear? Working with doubt is really important. If we don't understand it, it can be a huge obstacle on the path. And yet if we do understand it, it is super workable and it's not a problem.

So the next question is really interesting, and it did make me reflect a lot: How do we deal with feelings of self-loathing, depression, and self-unworthiness? How do we deal with shame and guilt? Now we're really getting into some very difficult and painful mindsets and emotions.

So first to say, I am not a trained psychologist. There are dimensions to this that I may not be addressing. But of course, these feelings do come up in meditation, and from a meditative point of view, we can come to some deeper understandings of them and how to work with them.

It seemed to me that the feelings of shame and guilt may be some of the emotions underlying feelings like self-loathing or self-hatred—when we have shame about something or guilt about something. So when I was reflecting on this question, I started thinking about the different conditions that may give rise to shame, and then how to work with those different conditions.

One obvious cause for shame to arise is when we've done something contrary to our own values—we've committed some unskillful action and we recognize it as unskillful. Then just in thinking about it afterwards, we can have this strong sense of shame. The second kind, or second condition, I simply call internalized shame. This is a feeling that may be conditioned from childhood and may have nothing to do with unskillful actions. It's just some unfortunate childhood conditioning, and so we grow up with this internalized feeling.

So how do we work first with the shame that comes from our own actions, when we've done something that has been unskillful? The challenging question in these situations, I think, is to reflect on and ask: what wisdom is to be gleaned from this very painful emotion? And I think this is probably not a question that is frequently asked.

But I had a very strong experience of this. I'm going to share a shame story that goes back forty years, but it's still quite vivid in my mind. I was on my first retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. I had come to IMS, and as I've mentioned before, he was a very demanding teacher, very formal, with a lot of pressure in that environment. One time I went in for an interview, and for whatever reason, whatever was going on in my mind, I just really exaggerated something about what I was experiencing. He looked at me and said, "That isn't true."

It was devastating. This great master was basically saying that I had just lied. And I realized that what he said was accurate. I left that interview mortified. There was so much shame and self-judgment. For a few days I was processing this, just going on and on. It is a really painful feeling.

But something really important came out of it, because I was on retreat. After I worked through all the shame and the judgment, I was watching my mind, trying to understand what had just happened. And I realized what was useful in that situation and that emotion for me. First was simply highlighting that yes, what I had said was really unskillful—it wasn't accurate, it wasn't true.

But even on a more subtle level, what was interesting—and this took some days to come to, it was not immediate—I realized that I was glad to have seen that my mind was capable of doing that. Because if you had asked me beforehand, in meeting with a teacher whom you totally respect and venerate, would you ever say something that's not true? Before that happened, my answer would have been: no, that's not something my mind would ever do. Well, surprise—it did do it.

And that was very freeing for me to see, because it cut through a certain self-delusion I had held—that my mind would never do something like that. Because of that delusion, I could have been repeating that same kind of behavior without really acknowledging it, always thinking, "No, no, this is something I would never do." But Sayadaw called me on it. He said, "No, that's not true."

And so the shame that I had revealed something about my mind which was very freeing. Because once we realize that yes, our minds are capable of all of this, then it's easier to keep an eye out for that kind of unskillful behavior. Are you following this? It's kind of a convoluted story, but it was really powerful.

The underlying point I want to make is that as painful as that emotion is, there's a lot we can learn from it. There's a lot we can learn about our own minds. But it's challenging because shame is a particularly painful feeling. More commonly, I think, we're either drowning in it, lost in all that self-judgment, or we're just trying to get rid of it in some way, distracting ourselves from it because it's so painful. And then we don't learn anything from it.

So I would simply suggest—and this is challenging, not easy to do because the feeling is so painful—that there's a great deal of wisdom embedded in that experience. It's reminding us that our actions have consequences. Our actions affect other people; our actions affect our own minds. To have that lesson reinforced throughout our lives—hopefully it doesn't always have to come from shame, it can come from more uplifting reminders—but that fundamental understanding that our actions have consequences is a huge lesson. I think very often we're just going through our lives acting out our conditioning, perhaps not paying as much attention as we should to the quality of our actions. What are the motivations behind them? Are they skillful? Are they unskillful? This is all part of our growth and our greater freedom.

What's also helpful to remember in all this is that our situation is not unique. Unless you were born a saint, I think all of us have done things in our lives that we're ashamed of—unskillful things that, when we become aware of them in one way or another, naturally give rise to that feeling of shame. Sometimes it may be about something really significant, and sometimes about something that to other people might seem small, but we know and understand that it was unskillful.

As a few reference points from the Buddhist texts: one of the stories from the Buddha's time tells of a man who killed 999 people before somehow crossing paths with the Buddha. Through the magic of his enlightenment, the Buddha got this man on the path, and he eventually became fully awakened. But can you imagine what he was feeling in that period between when his actions were reflected back to him by the Buddha and when he became fully enlightened? There must have been incredible feelings of shame. Then there's the Tibetan master Milarepa—I don't know if you know his story, but before he became enlightened, through some kind of psychic powers he caused the deaths of many relatives who had done him harm.

All of this is to say: hopefully you haven't gone around killing people, but even if that were the case, it's possible to learn from it. It's possible to actually come to a place of freedom. So even though it's challenging, if that feeling is strong for whatever reason, can we see it or understand it as a loud ringing mindfulness bell? That difficult emotion is telling us something about the quality of our actions and the impact they've had on ourselves or other people or both. We can truly transform this painful emotion into liberating wisdom, though it takes considerable interest and courage to do this.

So recognizing that if at any time this emotion is what's happening, see if you can call up that sense of interest and courage. And watch to see that it doesn't morph into what in other Buddhist contexts is called the near enemy of shame, which is the feeling of guilt. These are two different feelings.

I've worked with guilt—not so much in that situation but in others—reflecting on things I had done. At a certain point, again on retreat, it was coming up really strongly in my mind and it piqued my interest. What is going on here? Why is this feeling of guilt so strong? I realized through looking directly that guilt is really an ego trip, because it's saying "I'm so bad"—with an emphasis on the "I." It's just strengthening the sense of self. There's a profound difference in our hearts and minds between guilt and regret.

By saying guilt is an ego trip, I don't mean to suggest we should not take responsibility for our actions, but guilt is not a useful response. It's actually quite unskillful because it merely strengthens the ego self. If instead we can have that transform into re-

gret or remorse—where we're acknowledging what we've done, taking responsibility, but without that self-laceration—then we respond in whatever way is appropriate. If it's possible to make amends, we do it with the people involved. If it's an internal process of asking forgiveness, we engage that. If it leads us to the strength of resolve, "No, I'm not going to do that again"—there's a wisdom in regret and remorse that is simply not present in guilt. I think it's really helpful to begin sorting all of this out.

Now, with regard to deeply internalized guilt that may have come from childhood—this is a whole different matter, because it's not arising because of something we've done. It's actually arising because of things done to us in some unskillful way. If we can recognize it as such and frame the feeling with mindfulness—seeing it and understanding to some extent where it comes from, coming to a place of acceptance so that we're not fighting or struggling with it—that provides the space for the feeling to arise and pass away. If we're struggling and fighting with it, that actually locks it in.

So if this is a deeply internalized feeling from childhood conditioning, it may come up frequently, but it is still just a feeling in the moment. We can learn to relate to it in a way that is much more spacious. A phrase from a Tibetan teacher encapsulates this attitude beautifully—it just felt so skillful to me—

He wasn't talking so much about shame, but about other emotions. He said, "It's real, but not true." And I thought that really captures it, because we're acknowledging the reality of our present experience. Yes, this is real, and it's not true. And so that's what gives us the doorway to some freedom with it, to hold both. I think that's the balance.

The last thing to say about this—it was a big question with a long answer—is that with this deeply internalized, conditioned shame, it may be that a therapeutic environment could be helpful in really working on some of that early conditioning. So that also is another avenue of approach.

---

The next question: "My practice starts out with a single-pointed focus on the breath and then a body scan. Then I focus on my whole body at once. I feel a tingling all over my body, which is very calming. If the sensations fade, I refocus and try to stay in this state. Is there something I might be doing to go deeper?"

Well, this is a really important question because it points to one of the most pointed teachings of the Buddha. Whenever I reflect on this or say it, it makes me sit up straight because it's so direct. The Buddha said, "As long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible."

At least for myself, I have a little way to go. Because this conditioning is almost hard-wired. Of course we want what's pleasant. Of course we want to get rid of what's unpleasant. This may even be the product of evolution. But as a scientist friend of mine said, "Evolution programs us for survival, not for liberation." So even though it may be very deeply conditioned, if we're considering what frees the mind, this is the point to look at.

And mindfulness is such an amazing quality of the mind that can actually help us relate to these two universal aspects of our experience. Some things are pleasant, some things are unpleasant. This is all of life. So it's not that those two aspects are going to go away, but how we relate to them—that's the essence of our practice.

And mindfulness is really quite amazing. For example, with those nice tingly sensations—yes, they're very pleasant when that happens in practice. Can we be mindful of them without wanting them to continue? Because that's just a kind of attachment, attachment to the pleasant. In being mindful, we are experiencing the pleasantness. So it's not that we're pushing pleasantness away. It's just that we're not holding on, we're not attached to it. This is a fine line in our practice and in our lives. But it's really worth exploring because it will give you an increasingly deeper sense of the power of mindfulness and how it leads to freedom.

Because when we can be mindful—oh yes, pleasant, pleasant, unpleasant—and we're just open to experiencing unpleasant, coming to that place where it's okay, it's okay to feel unpleasant... but that's not our usual condition. Usually something unpleasant comes and I want to get rid of it. So in some way, this is the essence of the practice.

It might be interesting at times to practice in two ways: either when there's something noticeably pleasant or noticeably unpleasant. Using those experiences as a time to practice, reminding myself, "Pleasant, okay, pleasant. Let me feel it not holding on, just being open, being spacious, letting it do whatever it does." Maybe it'll get stronger, maybe it'll get weaker, maybe it'll disappear. That doesn't matter because what we're practicing is non-attachment. We're not practicing to have certain experiences.

I want to repeat that because it is the key point. We are not practicing for certain experiences, even though we often are. We're practicing for something. But really to reflect: no, what we're practicing is to be free of attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. That's the practice. So we can use these times that are particularly pleasant or unpleasant to practice what is the essence. But we have to remember and call to mind what the essence is, because it's very easy to be seduced into thinking that a pleasant sitting is a good one and a painful sitting—oh, I just had a terrible sitting.

Or if we were sitting in some kind of bliss or ease and somebody asked, "How was your sitting?" we'd say, "Oh, my sitting was great." That's our usual way of assessing our experience, and it's incorrect. I feel like I'm pounding this home a bit, but it is the essence of it, so I wanted to emphasize that.

Not holding on to pleasant sensations.

These next few questions are going to require another long response because they touch on something central to the Buddha's teachings and to liberation—something with so many subtle aspects.

One person writes: "I have practiced mindfulness meditation intermittently over the past two years. I really struggle with distancing or freeing myself from the concept of self. Any suggestions?"

Another asks: "How do you balance knowing yourself—life story, abilities, traits, interests—and deepening insight into non-self? Our culture really emphasizes self, especially for career. How do you balance self and not-self?"

And then: "What's the difference between knowing the walking and walking without the 'I'?"

As we all know, just like attachment and aversion, the concept of self is really deeply conditioned. You could go up to anybody on the street and ask, "Is there a self? Do you have a self?" Everyone will say yes. This is our normal way of living and understanding things. Of course there's a self. So that concept, until we're quite far along the path, is going to be there and it's going to be strong—this view of self.

The first thing to say is that even when we hear the teachings about non-self and it's not really clear to us, or it's a little confusing, or we hold it up as an ideal, we shouldn't struggle with it, because the struggle just entangles us further. The idea is to take interest in it and to begin to understand both what it's referring to and how it's created. How does this concept of self come to be if it's not there in the first place? That's an interesting question.

The term "self" is simply a designation, a word for something. It's pointing to something. The self is not a thing in itself—it's pointing to something. So then the question becomes: what is it actually pointing to? When we use that term, which we do conventionally speaking, and I'm not suggesting we stop using it—it's convenient—we have to ask, well, what is that term actually referring to?

In the Buddhist context, it's pretty simple. The term "self" is a designation for the changing mind-body process. And of course, the whole of meditation is the exploration of this mind-body process.

Just like the term "river" is a designation for the phenomenon of flowing water between banks. It's the flowing water that the term "river" refers to. And that river is not a thing in itself apart from the flowing water—it's just a referent.

Or a rainbow. I've used these examples often. A rainbow appears in the sky, beautiful. We all love to see a rainbow. But what is a rainbow? A rainbow is an appearance arising when certain elements of air and light and moisture come together in a certain way. The appearance is there, and we all have the experience of rainbow, but rainbow is not something in itself. It's just an appearance arising out of conditions.

So the question really becomes: how does this concept of self come to be? And more importantly, how does the felt sense of it arise? That second part is really crucial, because we will feel like there's a self, right? It's not just some abstraction disconnected from our experience. So how does this felt sense of something that's not really there come about?

And also how the concept of self can be useful, because it is useful at times.

So the simplest way of seeing how this felt sense of self comes to be—and I'm sure you've experienced this many times in your practice—is that there's a flow of mind-body experiences: thoughts and feelings and emotions and sensations. In any moment when there is an identification with the object, so a thought arises in the mind. The thought is impersonal. But a thought arises, and for almost everybody there's this almost automatic identification with the thought. "I'm thinking. My thought." So this process of identification is its own process. The process of identifying with something is itself selfless. However, that process is what creates the felt sense of an "I." I'm thinking. I'm hurting. I'm happy. I'm sad. All of these experiences are impersonal, arising out of conditions. And yet, because this process of identifying with them is so habituated, over and over again we're just creating this felt sense of an "I."

This is not hard to see, at least occasionally. Just notice when you're sitting—notice the difference between the experience of being lost in a thought and being aware that a thought is happening. Being lost in a thought is when we're identified with it. Being aware that a thought is happening is seeing the impersonal nature of the thought. We're just sitting and aware, and a thought arises and passes away without any identification

at all. That will give you an immediate sense of the difference, an understanding of how the felt sense of self comes to be and how we can be free of it. And we have countless thoughts during the day, so there are endless opportunities to practice this.

There's another way to see how the sense of self is so deeply, deeply conditioned in us. Take the walking meditation. When we're walking, just feeling the movement and the touch—this is an experiment for you to make, and I hope you'll do it because I found it to be very revealing. You're walking, and even as you're being mindful of the movement and touch, see if you notice a very subtle overlay of an image of foot or leg. It's not in the front of the mind. It's just—I don't know the right word; this may be the wrong word, but it's coming to mind—diaphanous. Just something that is barely there, but there.

I've noticed this. When I'm walking, I'm feeling the movement, but somewhere in the mind is this subtle overlay of this image or concept: foot or leg. When that's there, it's a very easy step—almost an automatic one—to "my foot, my leg," and right there the sense of self is back. Foot and leg belong to me.

One way to contrast the experience of walking in a selfless way with the experience of walking when there is this subtle overlay of that image and concept—and then all of a sudden, foot, leg, my foot, my leg—is when you're walking to frame the experience in terms of the elements that the Buddha talked about. In those days, in Buddhist language, they spoke of earth, air, fire, and water elements. They're really just shorthand for different experiences. Air element is movement or pressure. Earth element is hardness. We use earth element, air element as a shorthand pointing to those experiences of hardness, of movement, of softness.

What I found in walking—I just started making the mental note for some periods of time—I would just be noting "air" or "air element" as I moved, "earth element" as I touched. Air, earth, air element, earth element. And it was really striking, because unlike the notion of foot or leg, it's very unlikely that our mind would say, "my air element, my earth element." Our mind doesn't go there. And so then we're dropping into the impersonal nature of those sensations. They're selfless. It's just arising out of the conditions of the body and the movement and the touching the ground. Completely impersonal. No "I," no self is involved at all. And it's pretty dramatic. It doesn't take years of practice to experience it.

We don't have to have any exceptional amount of concentration. It's just remembering to make that shift in how we're experiencing, how we're framing the experience. This can be really helpful.

Very recently, just in the last week or so, I've been reflecting on a way of understanding why the sense of self is so incredibly seductive. The world is running on that concept. Mostly everybody is just moving through their lives centered around the sense of I, the sense of self. So I was trying to give expression to the whole Buddhist teaching—and this is really key to the Buddhist teachings on awakening, on freedom—understanding selflessness. Why is it so seductive?

I was reading this book that I just happened to come across, and I only got to the first few pages. It's a book on what is called complexity theory and the unpredictable nature of emergent properties. Now you can see why I only got to a few pages. But it really was pointing to something for me.

So what does emergent properties mean? It means that when you have a collection of elements, these elements in working together create something greater than the sum of its parts. We can take many different examples. Just take the example of a car. The car is made of all these many, many parts. If you laid them out on the ground, there would be no car—it would just be these pieces. But you put the pieces together in a certain way, and the emergent properties of a car emerge: the fact that you can get into it and drive someplace. You could never tell what those emergent properties are from just looking at the parts. But in coming together, all of a sudden there's a new level of experience.

This is where it all ties in. When I read that, I thought, "Oh, the sense of self is really describing the emergent properties of the basic elements of this mind and body"—the physical elements, all the mental qualities, consciousness. These are like the parts of the car. These are just the elements of what we call self. And the elements by themselves, if we laid them out, would not constitute what we recognize as being a person. But when they are working together, as they are in our lives as human beings—these basic elements of physical sensations, mind states, consciousness—when these basic elements come together, the emergent property of what we call self arises, of who we recognize: "Oh yeah, that's who this is." So self in this way is a designation for the emergent properties of the basic elements.

There's a great little story of Nasruddin, who was this Sufi teaching figure—wise man, crazy man, fool—and there are lots of stories about him. He went into the bank one day, wanting to cash a check. The bank teller says, "Well, show me some identification." He's looking, and he doesn't have any. Then he pulls a mirror out of his pocket, looks at it, and says, "Yep, that's me."

That's what we do. We recognize the emergent properties of the basic elements as being self. So on that level, it's real. The self is real because it's describing what has emerged from the working together of all the elements.

What's interesting, though, is that this concept of self describing the emergent properties does not tell us anything about the basic elements which have gone into it. And it's on the level of the basic elements that we see impermanence, that we see the dukkha aspect, the unreliability aspect—which is not necessarily apparent when we're using the idea of self to describe the emerging property of how we move through the world.

There's a phrase that I've used very often in the teachings. It comes from a Tibetan teacher who says, "The self is real, but not really real." I think it's pointing to these two levels. The self is real as an emergent property of the different elements, but it's not really real because when we drop into the experience of the elements in themselves, we see the selfless, impersonal nature of it all.

Why is that important? Because when we see the underlying reality—just the changing, impersonal, impermanent nature of the sensations, thoughts, emotions, feelings, everything, all of those basic elements—it begins to weaken our attachment to them, because we see that they're constantly changing. From that experience, then, as we're living our life in the realm of emergent properties, going through life as a self and as a being—which on that level, those concepts are fine—but having understood the elements which gave rise to them, we can live that life with a lot greater freedom and a lot less suffering, because we're not attached to it.

That's why this belief in self is so seductive—because it does refer to something, but not to what's fundamental.

The next question touches on such deep things of life and aging and death: "I've been meditating for decades and have a daily practice. At age 85, I am experiencing memory loss and have been recently diagnosed with Parkinson's and mild cognitive disorder. I find myself more anxious in general and trying to adjust to the losses I confront—moving to assisted living and giving up my independence, giving up driving my car, no longer as active in my artist community, no longer painting as I once did, the loss of connection with my husband who has severe dementia, and being present with the impending loss of my own mind and, to some degree, my body. My question is, how can I use my practice to address this? How can one use the mind to deal with the losing of the mind? How do I accept such tremendous loss with grace? How do I address the anxiety when I'm too overwhelmed to sit for long?"

As I was thinking about this and reflecting on the whole process of aging and decline, a few different reflections came to mind.

First, to really stay present in the moment, especially at this stage—where it looks like the intensity is looming on the horizon, but the full experience has not yet arisen. I think it's really important to stay present with one's actual experience and watch the thoughts that come and trigger fear or anxiety. Because in the moment, things might be okay, reasonably okay. But then certain thoughts come, anticipating what's coming, creating this whole story and scenario in our minds. Depending on the particular kinds of thoughts—and there could be a wide range—some could be looking at the situation with clarity and balance, just figuring out what the next steps are. Or certain kinds of thoughts could trigger tremendous fear. That's not helpful. It doesn't resolve anything and just creates a lot of suffering for ourselves in the present moment.

So it's really helpful and interesting to watch how thoughts trigger emotions. This happens not only in the situation I just described but throughout our lives. This relationship of thought to emotion is really fascinating to observe. The thought may be about something that is not actually happening in the moment, and yet just having the thought can create powerful emotions of distress.

If we can catch the particular thoughts that trigger fear, that trigger anxiety, and see them—"Oh, this is just a thought, this is just a thought now"—and come back to the actual present experience, that's a first step in this whole process.

In the larger picture, as we might be looking ahead and seeing what could happen, I think it's really helpful to remember that certain parts of the mind may show decline while other parts do not. It's not a universal move toward decline.

Let me give you a few examples. I had one friend, a few years older than myself, who I think had Lewy body dementia, and so was in cognitive and physical decline. It was very clear to him and to his family and friends. But what was so interesting—and he was a longtime practitioner and teacher—was that even when in so many areas of conversation you could see the decline, as soon as we started having a Dharma discussion, it was like that part of his mind came alive. We would have this really clear communication. It was just so interesting to see that the mind has different—I don't know if "parts" is exactly the right word—but different capacities. And it may be that some capacities decline and others don't.

Let me give you another example.

There was a very well-known Cambodian monk named Maha Gosananda. He had done amazing work in Cambodia after the Pol Pot horror, leading peace walks through minefields to try to address all the landmines that were there. So he was doing amazing work, and his main practice was metta, loving kindness, throughout his life. Over the course of his life, he had so cultivated this quality of metta.

I remember one time I was teaching at Spirit Rock in California, and he came to visit. He was already in quite an advanced state of cognitive decline, not really connecting on that level. But his whole being was radiating loving kindness. He was luminous with love, even though his mind, on the cognitive or intellectual level—you could really see a lot of that was gone. But there was this whole other part that was just so incredibly beautiful and connecting.

I think it's important to recognize this: that even as we see limitations and decline in one area, it doesn't mean that it's necessarily the whole of our being. There are other aspects, and we might want to really explore that even before there has been a great degree of cognitive decline. Just to reflect: what are the qualities that can still be here, that will still be here? And cultivate them.

In a way, in looking forward to where our aging process leads—we're all in the queue; this is just what happens—it would be really helpful to grow our capacity to look realistically at what we can do and what we can't do. Because we will be losing different abilities. For each of us it will be different, but for sure, at a certain age, for almost everybody, we will be losing capacities, whether physical ability or mental ability.

I think it's really helpful if we can come to an acceptance of the fact that this is going to happen in one way or another, and just have a very realistic view: I can do this now, but I can't do this. It's similar to how we might adjust to some physical disability, where we just can't do what we used to do. We recognize that and say, okay, this is the situation. I can do this and not that.

With a certain amount of reflection on all this, and practice of awareness and honesty with oneself, I think it's possible to go through this decline—in one way or another—with a sense of grace rather than struggle. We each have to find our own way. Obviously people have their own unique situations, and some may be more challenging or less challenging. But I wanted to put some of these ideas out as a general framework.

In terms of working with the fear—as we look ahead and see what might be coming down the road—the fear of change, the fear of impermanence, comes from our attachment to things staying a certain way. The fear is not inherent in the change itself. The fear arises because we're attached to it being a certain way. To me, this is a very import-

ant understanding because it gives us agency over our own suffering. If the fear were inherent in the changes that take place, that would be unfortunate. But in fact, the fear arises because of attachment in our mind to things staying a certain way. That's something we do have agency over.

We can practice being with even difficult situations. As I was saying earlier, if there's aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. Now, I'm not suggesting this is easy. With really challenging situations, it's challenging to ask: Can I be accepting of this? Can I be with this without struggle? This is how it is. This is a powerful practice.

Even if it's difficult to sit for long at this stage of life, it's almost like one's whole life becomes a sitting. Whether you formally sit or not—of course, if you can, it will definitely be helpful—but just bringing mindfulness and awareness and interest and investigation to the experience we're going through. As I say, it's universal. It's what we all will go through. To learn how to be with it, to practice being with it—I think it's a tremendous challenge, but also a tremendous opportunity to really live in these last years of our lives with a lot of grace and peace. It's a very rich arena of practice and understanding.

Let me just take another few minutes, and I think Catherine will read some of those questions.

This person writes, "I really enjoyed the discussion about emergent properties and the self, but I'm wondering what happens if we are attached to the emergent property itself rather than the underlying fundamentals."

I think mostly we are attached to the emergent property. I think that's where we get caught, because it's in that emergent property. It's like from those basic elements, what emerges is the being that we are. And so we're going from the level of elements to the level of a functioning being operating in the world, and this is our life. I think that's where the sense of self is so strong.

Going to the level of the elements, it's on that level that it's easier to see the impersonal nature of them. As I said earlier, we can begin to notice that process of identifying with a thought or identifying with an emotion. That can be pretty obvious to us in our practice as we're being mindful. Whereas it's not so clear or workable to deal with the self on the level of the emergent property, because what has emerged is that sense of a being.

And that's why the meditation, by going to the elemental level and seeing how we identify with various things, can then, as we're operating in this world as a being, as an individual being, we can do it with that deeper understanding. We can live on this level of being with less attachment because of our insight on the elemental level.

Another question comes in. This person writes, "Why is guilt a near enemy of shame? Could you elaborate?"

I used that term "near enemy" loosely because I haven't actually come across the term near enemy with reference to shame and guilt. Usually that term is referred to the different Brahma-Viharas, like the near enemy of mettā is attachment, or as I said last week, the near enemy of equanimity is indifference.

I was using that term, which I didn't find in the text, but it seemed analogous because guilt could be conflated with shame. If we're ashamed of something, it's almost like just half a step to feeling guilty about it. "Of course I should feel guilty—look what I did." But that's missing the point that it's a different feeling than shame, and that the feeling of guilt is unskillful. Even though shame is unpleasant—more than unpleasant, it can be painful—it doesn't make it unskillful. When it arises from something we've done that was unskillful, shame can actually be a wholesome mind state, even though it's really painful. Whereas guilt is unwholesome, it's unskillful.

I was trying to make the distinction and to see that from the feeling of shame, when it does come from something we may have done, a much more appropriate frame would be regret or remorse. And even just in those words, can you hear the difference emotionally between guilt and regret? It is a very different quality. With regret or remorse, there's some space there to work with it and respond in an appropriate way. Guilt—we just get locked into this self-laceration. It's not helpful and it's a lot of suffering.

When I was working with guilt, and when I really first saw it as an ego trip—in the Buddhist texts, Mara represents the embodiment of delusion, and often the phrase "Mara, I see you" is used when you see through something. So when I saw guilt as an ego trip, I developed this technique of wagging my finger at Mara. "Oh, Mara, I see you." And it was very freeing. I'm not going to get hooked by this guilt. But there was regret and remorse, and then I dealt with that.

This next person writes, "How does one thrive in a community of people who do not practice and live a harmonious life with others while continuing to practice without feeling isolated?"

It doesn't need to be a problem, so don't make it a problem. Everybody has their own interests, their own way of how they want to spend their time and what they want to do.

I think the more important question or consideration would be whether, in the community or family or whatever group of people one is involved in, there's a basic support for us doing what we want to do. A kind of respect for our choices. If you're the only one who's meditating and other people aren't interested in it, that's fine. But are they being supportive of your interests, just as you can be supportive of theirs?

And it may be that once they see the glorious transformation of your life, they might be inspired to learn about it a little bit.

I'd be very careful about thinking that one needs everyone in one's circle to be doing the same thing we're doing. It's nice when that happens, but I don't think it's necessary.

There were quite a few questions from people wanting to know how to find a teacher when they live in an area where one isn't available. This comes up often, and I think what's best—and it's really possible these days since so much is offered online—is to do a little exploration through listening to talks. Most of you probably know Dharma Seed, which has thousands of talks from different teachers. Explore a little bit and see who you resonate with, or a few teachers you might resonate with in particular.

Then you could look for any online offerings they may be giving, because a lot of teachers now are doing things online. Or some teachers—not everyone—but some are willing to engage in one-on-one interviews. If there's a teacher you particularly resonate with, perhaps do some online retreats with them or different programs, then reach out and inquire whether they do one-on-one interviews or not. Even when living in a more isolated place, thanks to Zoom, a lot is being offered. It might be worth exploring.

I really appreciate your questions. I spent a fair amount of time going through them and reflecting on them, so I learned a lot from the process. I hope some of the responses were helpful.

One last thought: there were many questions specifically about different elements of practice. As you know, I've been teaching a long time and have a ton of talks on Dharma Seed covering a whole range of topics. If something is coming up for you—how to work with sleepiness or doubt or so many other things—you could go on Dharma Seed under my talks, or any other teacher's, sorted by subject. Then you would get a full talk on whatever topic interests you. That's a resource you could really avail yourselves of.

Thank you all. This has really been a pleasure, and we'll pick up next year.

# Notable Dhamma Teachers

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein
Satipaṭṭhāna and the Buddha's discourses, from a founding IMS teacher (2016 onward)

83 talks · Joseph Goldstein

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity.
Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.

dharmaseed.org