Joseph's Dhamma Story - Part 1

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:01:16

So, happy Halloween.

Tonight, instead of the usual kind of dharma talk, I thought I would share with you some of the ups and downs of my own spiritual journey. Hopefully it might be of some help to you in your own unfolding practice, because so much of what's experienced, even though it's conditioned very personally by our own circumstances, so much of what we experience is in common.

As you know, in many spiritual traditions, it's some awareness of suffering that often prompts at least the initial looking and investigation and wondering: How can I understand this life?

Well, for me this happened quite young. Growing up as a young boy, I would have these intermittent and quite uncontrollable temper tantrums. Something would provoke it, and then an explosion of temper. It made me and everyone around me quite miserable—not a very pleasant situation. But I didn't know what to do about it.

Then, when I was about eleven, I had what I consider my first real insight into the workings of the mind. It came in a very childlike way, but it was profound in its own way. Just after one of these big outbursts of anger and temper and screaming, I looked into my mind and realized that there was the possibility of a space between the impulse to the temper outburst and the action. I saw that in that space there was a choice.

This was kind of amazing to me—to see that I actually could have some control over what seemed so uncontrollable. In a very young and naive way, I did the very ordinary practice of what we're often told with temper: count to ten before you say anything. That's just what I started doing. I would count to ten, and the impulse for the outburst would pass. It was quite amazing—a real transformation in that particular context.

When I was twelve, my father died quite suddenly, within about a two-month period. He got sick and then he died. He had leukemia. Even though it took me quite a long time to process it emotionally—because in those years, at least in my family background, that really wasn't a topic of conversation, it wasn't talked about—I was just being a twelve-year-old, holding the various emotions but not really understanding them.

Even though it took me a long time to process emotionally, a rather profound understanding of death arose: somebody's there and then they're not there. Just what that experience is like, and the very immediate realization that it can happen any time—it's not just some time in the future.

I finished high school, went on to college, and started studying philosophy because I was still interested in trying to understand life. But studying philosophy with that end in mind was very frustrating for me, because at the university, the professors really weren't interested in philosophy as a way to live life. It was just trying to understand what this guy said, what that guy said—with no application at all, as far as I could see, to living a life wisely. That was not the approach taken, at least then. Maybe it's changed.

But I was taking one course in my philosophy training, a course in Eastern philosophy, and we were reading the Bhagavad Gita. One line in that book just jumped out at me in a way that I really didn't understand. I didn't understand why, but something resonated very deeply. The line was: *Act without attachment to the fruit of the action.*

This was my first introduction even to the notion of non-attachment, because it's not a big Western value. This was really the first time I'd come across the idea. I didn't really have any understanding of it or quite know what it meant, but something registered very deeply. There's something here that I want to explore.

Years later, I heard the Dalai Lama express this same teaching from the Bhagavad Gita—act without attachment to the fruit of the action—but he expressed it in another way, which I've mentioned earlier in the retreat but wanted to reiterate because it's such a powerful teaching in the context of our Western culture. He said that it's the motivation behind an action that's the real measure of it, not its success or failure. He was really saying the same thing: non-attachment to the fruit of the action. What's the motive?

Everything rests on the tip of motivation. Beginning to see that and beginning to work with it, we realize something that must be so obvious: we can't control the outcome of our actions because outcomes are dependent on so many conditions—in ourselves, in other people, in the world. We can do our best, but what we can do is really purify our motivations. That's within our power. This understanding gives a very clear direction for how to live our lives in a way that's of value.

Then in my junior year, I was on the subway in New York—this was in 1964—and I met some people who were in one of the very early Peace Corps trainings. It was just starting, one of the very first groups. I started talking to them on the subway, then invited them back to my apartment. Suddenly the idea of the Peace Corps just captivated my mind. I was definitely ready for some adventure after these years of being in school, some way to get out and see the world. So I applied to go to East Africa. But some karma intervened and I was sent to Thailand instead. If not, we might be doing African drumming. But somehow you ended up having to come here and sit quietly watching your breath.

It was in Thailand that I had my first introduction to Buddhism. My first introduction was going to a famous temple in Bangkok, the Marble Temple, where an Indian and English monk were teaching a group for Westerners. I went, still very much in my philosophic mode—I actually went with a copy of Spinoza in my hand. He was my great hero in college. I was going to debate the monks. Of course, now I remember almost nothing of what Spinoza said. But I would go to these groups and ask so many questions that people stopped coming. I'm sure you've been in groups where there's this one obnoxious person and you

just wish they'd shut up. Well, that was me.

Finally, one of the monks, I think out of some desperation, said, "Why don't you try meditating?" And again, here I was in the East, very young, about twenty years old. It was all very exotic to me. Nobody I knew had ever meditated. I didn't know what it was about. So I got all this paraphernalia together, sat down, set the alarm clock for five minutes. But something really important happened in those first five minutes. It was the understanding that there's a way to look in as well as a way to look out. This was revelatory, really. When you think of how we grow up in our culture, there's very little guidance in looking in. It's all about looking out. To see that there was a way, that there was actually a systematic way for looking in—that was really powerful. I was so excited by this, I started inviting my friends over to watch me meditate. They didn't come back very often. So that's when I decided to just start a center. Thank you all for coming.

During my second year in the Peace Corps—it's a two-year volunteer time—I was teaching English at a school, but I decided to undertake a project I had wanted to do in college but never had the time for: to read Marcel Proust's great masterpiece, *A Remembrance of Things Past*. It's perhaps two thousand pages, a very long book with very long sentences. And it's all about time. Proust had a kind of—I don't know if you would call it mystical, but certainly transforming—experience which prompted the book. He smelled a madeleine, a French pastry, and as an adult passing by a shop, that smell called back time, all the memories of his childhood. The book is an exploration of what this means. And in the last fifty pages, there's really quite an interesting exploration about the nature of time.

But then I'd be walking down some dark Bangkok streets at night and fear would arise. Something's still here. So that kind of illuminated the situation. And I slowly started to realize that this experience was not the end of the spiritual path. It was actually the beginning of the spiritual path.

Experiences like this—people have different kinds, different levels of intensity, different levels of transformation—but all kinds of openings like this really are intimations of possibilities. They represent, or they are, the transforming experience of what's possible, not some final accomplishment.

I think this is such an important point on our spiritual journeys, because at different times in our practice, we may have real transforming moments of understanding where something radically shifts. And in the moment of recognition, just after such an experience, the mind can easily get seduced by thoughts like "Maybe I'm enlightened. Maybe I'm all done." There's no self, there's no me, there's no one there. But then life continues, and we see that something's still here—old patterns, reactive emotions, fear.

So I want to emphasize this distinction between opening experiences and the actual work of transformation. When we look into our own mind, when we touch something of that unborn, unformed nature, it can be tremendously powerful and disorienting. The phrase that kept coming into my mind was "there's no me, there's no me"—from the perspective of non-arising, non-occurrence. This was extremely disorienting. I was just sitting in my friend's garden, listening to this text, and all of a sudden there was

this huge seismic shift.

I was about to leave Thailand after being there for two years, so things were already very unsettled. I didn't have any context for understanding the experience or what had happened. But I knew that in some fundamental way, something had shifted there.

It's important to see it in the correct way.

This is from an 11th century Korean Zen master named Chinul. He was in many ways one of the founders of Korean Zen. The framework of his teaching is called Sudden Awakening, Gradual Cultivation. There are some wonderful books of his teaching, and I very much appreciate that framework because it acknowledges the power of those moments of sudden awakening while also reminding us that gradual cultivation is needed. It's not the end of the path.

This is what he says: "Although coming into this life we may suddenly awaken to the fact that our self-nature is originally void and calm and no different from that of the Buddhas, old habits are difficult to eliminate completely. Consequently, when we come into contact with either favorable or adverse objects, then anger and happiness blaze forth. Adventitious defilements are no different from before. Nevertheless, although you must cultivate further, you have already awakened suddenly to the fact that deluded thoughts are originally void and the mind nature is originally pure."

I find that a very good framework for understanding—that we can have transforming insights into the empty nature of phenomena and still appreciate the fact there's a lot more work to do.

So I came back from the Peace Corps, came back to the States, profoundly moved by what had happened. And of course, I tried to repeat the experience. I would ask people to read the text to me again, and I would sit and look into my own mind—okay, unborn, unformed—and I'd be waiting. Clearly that was not the right approach.

I saw that I needed a teacher. And so I became motivated to go back to Asia to look for a teacher and really find a meditation practice that both expressed and deepened this understanding.

I went to India, first thinking I'd go back to Thailand, but stopping in India on the way. After a lot of searching around, I ended up in Bodh Gaya, which is of course the place of the Buddha's enlightenment—a very special place. At that time, this was in 1967, there were very few Westerners there, just a handful, four or five, staying at this place called the Burmese Vihara. I met some Westerners there who were studying with a teacher named Munindraji. They took me to meet him, and I began practicing with him.

When I first met him, and even as I got to know him very well over many years, he did not fit my idea of a guru at all. He was this very speedy little guy running around the bazaar. He just didn't have what I thought was the gravitas of some great enlightened being. Of course, this was a great teaching in itself—to cut through attachments I had to concepts of how wisdom should manifest.

One of his teachings that has remained in my mind: one time he was in the bazaar in Bodh Gaya, just haggling and bargaining for a little bag of peanuts, which of course is customary in India. But I was there studying to be enlightened. He was my teacher. And I said, "Munindraji, what are you doing? You're bargaining over five cents worth of peanuts."

And he said, "The path of the Dharma is to be simple, not to be a simpleton." And he went right on bargaining.

He was so engaged with the world, so interested in everything. He was incredibly open-minded. Over those years, as more Westerners would come and be interested in studying with different teachers and different traditions, he always encouraged people to explore whatever they wanted to explore.

One of the lines I remember him saying, which certainly rings true, was: "Go, explore, because the Dharma doesn't suffer in comparison to anything." His faith in the Dharma—the confidence and the appreciation of the teachings—was so complete. And that was a beautiful teaching because it inculcated that sense of openness. We don't have to hold on to our practice with fear or trying to be protective. There can be a very open-hearted sense of exploration of the world, of our lives.

The practice is so simple, as I hope you are getting a sense of by now. It's simply to be aware of what's arising and not to cling to it.

Has anybody not gotten that? I mean, what could be simpler? Be aware of what's arising and don't cling.

One of the things I very much appreciated about that first introduction with Munindraji is that there was no form, there was nothing to join. All he said when I came was, "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it." It seems so simple and so common sense. How else can we understand our minds except by looking in, except by observing them?

So I moved into the Burmese Vihara in Bodh Gaya and spent a good part of the next seven years there.

Now, in the Visuddhimagga, the Path of Purification—that great classical commentary—it lists all the attributes of a conducive place to meditate. The Burmese Vihara had none of them. It was right on the main road between Gaya and Bodh Gaya, so trucks and buses would be going by all the time. Directly across from it was a public water tap, and people would be coming there to wash, to do their laundry, to talk. We were surrounded by small Indian villages, which, as many of you who have been in Asia know, are often playing music over loudspeakers. So all of this was going on.

In India, they have rope beds—a wooden frame with a weaving of rope. They're actually quite comfortable, except that the bed was about five feet long. So that was a little problematic, hanging over the hard wooden end of it. And the first year I was so naive in the ways of India, I didn't even know about mosquito nets. Of course, there are a lot of mosquitoes. So I'm sleeping on this five-foot-long rope bed, no mosquito net, kind of wrapped up in towels and such. The food was really poor, really poor.

But with all of this, with all of these conditions, which were exactly opposite to what makes for a conducive place to practice, I felt such immense gratitude for having a place to practice, for being in a place that honored practice. It felt like a deva world to me, just because of that. In the midst of the craziness of the world, here was a situation where people were honoring this journey of looking inward, of just sitting and walking and sitting and walking.

As I began my practice, concentration did not come easily at all. I'm not one of those people—there are a few, there aren't many, but there are some—who sit down and just due to past parami, their minds settle into easy and deep concentration. I was not like that. My mind basically wandered the whole time. I would just be sitting and thinking. And it was kind of fun. I was enjoying my thoughts. And the hour went quickly. I would think, "Oh, that was kind of a nice sitting." It took a long time for the mind to begin to quiet down.

Also, I was not at all used to sitting cross-legged. It was incredibly painful. I basically couldn't sit cross-legged for more than five minutes. The pain was just too intense. So I sat in a chair, but I'm pretty tall, so most chairs are not that comfortable anyway. So I put the chair on bricks. I put each leg on four bricks. It was kind of a big wicker chair on the bricks, and then I put cushions on the chair, and then I put my mosquito net over it. So it was like sitting on this great throne—a combination throne and shoeshine box. That's what it looked like. And it was a little embarrassing when Munindraji would come in.

But it worked. It worked. So it reinforced my very pragmatic approach to practice. The posture really doesn't matter if we have that interest and commitment to sit in some posture where we can be pretty still and observe and look.

When I left Bodh Gaya for the first time—the very first time I was just there for six weeks, and I had to come back to the States and then went back to India a few months later—Munindra said something which Patricia mentioned the other night, and I wanted to reiterate. Even though at the time, when I was pulling away in the rickshaw and Munindra said this, it sounded a bit like a cliché to me, over the years I have so come to appreciate the depth of meaning.

He said as I was pulling away, "The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma."

I think we really want to let that in, because it has such powerful implications for how we live our lives. The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma. It doesn't mean that unpleasant things don't happen in our lives—of course they're going to happen. What it does mean is that as we protect the Dharma, it protects us from excessive greed, excessive hatred, excessive delusion, excessive fear, because we know how to see it, we know how to recognize it, we know how to work with it. We know to some extent what renunciation means, what letting go means. The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma.

I spent most of those seven years in India, though I came back and forth several times to the States, mostly to work and make some money to go back. The first few times of coming back were very difficult—that

transition time. Some of you are going into a transition time now. For me, coming back from India, not only was it a transition from intensive practice to more engagement in the world, it was also the transition from the simplicity of India to being in America. In some ways that was even harder. Basically what I did those first couple of times was sit around listening to Bob Dylan, doing other things one did in the sixties, feeling depressed. But then I'd go back to India and get all energized by my practice again. And then sometime I'd have to come back.

What was interesting is that after doing this for a few times, back and forth, the transitions became much easier. I really began to see and understand those times of change as being as much of the practice as being on an intensive retreat. It's just another form. Other things are happening.

So it's really important, especially for those of you who will be leaving, to understand that the retreat does not end. It never ends. Sorry. The Dharma is our life, and it doesn't make sense to be committed to awakening on retreat and somehow let that go when we leave. What's that about? It's really important to see all these times of transition and change—change of form and activity—as fruitful for Dharma practice as this has been. It's important to see it and hold it and explore that, even if the first few times of transition are difficult, and they might well be.

On one of my trips back, I saw a movie called *Charly*. I don't know if any of you saw it. It was based on a short story called *Flowers for Algernon*. Not to go into the whole story of the movie, but in it there were a few scenes where they showed people being cruel to somebody who was mentally challenged. I saw that—again, this was in the context of this long period of intensive practice—and just the cruelty of it somehow touched my heart. I was seeing my own potential for that kind of cruelty.

When I went back to India, I told Munindra-ji, "I really want to do some mettā practice. I really want to develop that quality of mettā, because seeing that cruelty was so painful."

This was my first experience of an intensive period of mettā. It took quite a while to get into it, but after about a month or so of doing it intensively, it really was the first experience of my mind getting quite concentrated. And then with the mettā came tremendous feelings of happiness. It was just wonderful. I thought, "Great, this is how my life is going to be." I really thought that. I thought, "Okay, this is it."

But then, of course, conditions changed. There was a really important lesson in this, which hopefully we're all learning: the nature of the spiritual path is not about simply hanging out in blissful states. That's not what it's about. It's about opening to that, certainly, but also exploring the shadow sides of our minds, really seeing the unwholesome parts of our minds.

In doing the brahmavihāras, you may have noticed at times that we can be doing mettā or compassion or any one of them, and very often it calls up its opposite. We're doing mettā and all of a sudden there's a wave of ill will. This is the purifying process. This is not a mistake.

I had a very striking example of that during this time. Again, this was my first experience of mettā

practice. I was sitting there, getting very concentrated and blissful. At that time I was in a room in the Burmese Vihara. It was an inside room, and there was a windowsill on the outside of the room but off a corridor.

And I would sometimes leave pieces of fruit on that windowsill outside in the corridor. There was a Nepali man who was a student of Munindra-ji's who had come to practice during that time, and he had a little servant boy with him.

So I'm sitting there, really very expansive, in quite a lot of bliss. *May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful, be free.* Then I hear this little rustling outside my window, and just the thought that comes into my mind: "That little Nepali kid is stealing my fruit." *May all beings be happy. May all beings be liberated.*

The contrast was so amazingly blatant. Even in the midst of all of our metta, very often it just touches the other side and we see the defilements arise.

One of the powers of doing the Brahma Viharas—having done them and then going out into the world—is that the practice illuminates times when we're feeling its opposite. When we spend so much time doing metta or compassion and then we're in some situation in the world where there's real ill will or cruelty or whatever it may be, having done the practice, it shines a spotlight on it. We see so clearly that unwholesome mind state in contrast to what we've practiced.

And so it's a great gift. It's not that the unwholesome things are going to stop arising—at least probably for a while. They will keep arising, but we see them. And we see that there's another possibility.

One last Munindra story, which was such a good teaching. I would be sitting there—by now I'd been there for quite a long time, over a number of years. The concentration had finally deepened, the practice was going well, and I'd be sitting for long hours.

But Munindra-ji had the habit of bringing any Western traveler who came to Bodh Gaya to come meet Joseph. Just to chit-chat. Munindra would meet them in the bazaar while he was haggling for peanuts—you know, I was there in the vihara doing my practice—and he would just drag all these people along. "Oh, come meet Joseph."

It got to a point where I just dreaded hearing his footsteps. This is my teacher, and I'm thinking, "Please, let it not be Munindra-ji." But it always was. He was always dragging somebody along.

So I would just have to get up from these states of really deep stillness and chat. At first I was terribly annoyed and irritated, and of course then my practice would be terribly annoyed and irritated. But he kept doing it. He didn't stop.

So at a certain point I just had to give up. And I realized something very significant: it didn't matter at all. If I stopped resisting it, I was sitting in a really quiet space, a calm space. Somebody comes—get up, talk to them. If I'm not making a problem in my mind, it's fine. That happens, they leave, go back to sitting. Not an

interruption at all.

So that was really a great lesson in how we can hold on so tightly to protecting our space, and that itself can become its own hindrance. It's not that we don't look for conducive surroundings—that's always helpful. But can we stay open just to what comes in the course of that time?

Freedom is all about our own minds. It's not about external conditions. I think we need to hear that a hundred thousand times.

Because the tendency so often is to think, "Oh, if the conditions were different, then I could get on with my practice." It's not about that. So we learn. We just learn.

Over the years—I first went to India about forty years ago—I've had the chance to study and practice with quite a few different teachers, some in the same tradition, some in different traditions. This gave me a great appreciation for the incredible richness of the Dharma. The Buddhist teachings are so vast and so deep and can be approached from so many different sides and angles and methodologies.

And in that, we all find our own way. For some people, it makes perfect sense to find a method that works for them and to stay with it. If that's the way that works, that's great. For other people, it may be helpful to understand different approaches. There's no right or wrong—it's just what's helpful for each one of us on our path at any particular time.

I see the Dharma as this wonderfully rich mandala of understanding. All of the different traditions and teachers and methods, and even qualities within a tradition that we're practicing—the Brahma Viharas or concentration or mindfulness or equanimity, whatever it is—all of these different aspects of the Dharma are just another piece of the mandala. We have this incredible good fortune of being in a situation where so much is available to us. So we find our way in that and appreciate the possibilities of developing all these many sides of ourselves.

To get into a sectarian attachment to a particular way, a particular method—even if it's a very good method that leads all the way to awakening—there's no need for the sectarian attachment. We can really honor and respect all the many ways of Dharma practice.

One of Munindraji's greatest students was Dipa Ma. I think we've spoken over these weeks about this extraordinary woman who was a student of his in Burma and then came back to live in Calcutta. In some way, of all the teachers I've had, she was really the person who inspired me the most in terms of the potential for what a heart and mind can be. Because in her extraordinary development, there was this rare combination of the deepest and most profound stillness and the most all-embracing love. That combination was just incredible to be in the presence of. When she would give a blessing, running her hands over your head and shoulders and back, it was like being bathed in love and wisdom. So tremendously inspiring to see that as a potential—yes, this is what the mind can become with practice, with training.

She could also be pretty demanding. She had a very high bar. One time I was with her and she said, "Joseph, I think you should sit for two days." She didn't mean a two-day retreat. She meant sit down and get up two days later, which she had done. I just started laughing—it just seemed impossible. And she just turned to me and said, "Don't be lazy."

Well, I never did quite reach that level of accomplishment. But it was, again, very inspiring—so many things are possible. Through the cultivation of mind, the mind can become so powerful and so loving and so still. She was a great example.

After some years, I also started practicing with another great teacher in India, Goenkaji. He was teaching another form of Vipassana, this body sweeping, a very powerful technique—a very concentrating technique. But he was very different than Munindraji. Munindraji was completely informal, and Goenkaji was pretty formal. He was the first one that I knew of who actually created the form of a ten-day retreat. Maybe there had been others, but this was the first time I had experienced that. He was very methodical in the teaching, with a very powerful presence and beautiful, wonderful chanting. He would chant in the hall, and there was just this amazing sense of devotion.

When I first sat a course with him, he would come in and people would bow to him. With Munindraji, people never bowed. So I said, "What's this bowing?" I didn't get it, and my mind was pretty judgmental about what all that was about. Quite amazingly, by the end of the first ten-day retreat, I understood why people were bowing. It was a good lesson both in my own comparing, judgmental mind and then really opening to that quality, that very beautiful heart quality of devotion, of faith.

When that devotion is there genuinely, coming from the inside rather than imposed from the outside, then bowing becomes a beautiful expression of that quality.

I want to end with a question that somebody recently asked me. After all these years of practice and teaching, they asked what inspires me the most and what brings me the most joy.

When I thought about the question, I saw there were two interrelated aspects of the Dharma that highlight what I value the most and what really brings the most happiness.

The first is something I mentioned earlier: understanding the possibility, the potential, and the practice of purifying our motivations—realizing that we don't have to stay lost and imprisoned in our habitual tendencies. There is a tremendous joy in seeing through the different defilements that arise in the mind. They're going to come for quite a long time. Until we're fully awakened, different defilements will arise. But to have the understanding and the confidence that we can actually purify our motivations—that we don't have to stay trapped and imprisoned by habitual tendencies, that we can see through them, let them go, recognize the empty nature of awareness—this is the first thing that really inspires me.

Every time I see a defilement in the mind clearly, in a very strange way, it makes me happy. It really makes me happy because I would much rather see it than not see it. There's that recognition: "Oh good, ill

will"—or whatever it is.

The second source of wonder in the Dharma is the growing experience that all of the brahmaviharas—mettā, compassion, joy, equanimity—are the expression of emptiness. The more we realize the selfless nature of experience, the more that wisdom grows, and we see that love and compassion and joy and equanimity are the activity of that wisdom. We see them as the natural expression of selflessness.

This is a great understanding of the mandala of the Dharma. They're not two different things. The more we understand selflessness, the more love and compassion become the way we engage with the world. This is a beautiful unfolding in our lives. We understand in an increasingly deep way that our practice is not for ourselves alone—that we can undertake this practice with the motivation, right up front, that all the effort we make, everything we do, can be with the aspiration that it be for the benefit, the welfare, the happiness, and the liberation of all beings.

I'd like to close with a wonderful teaching of the Dalai Lama. He calls it the true meaning of life:

"We are visitors on this planet. We are here for ninety or one hundred years at the very most. During that period, we must try to do something good and something useful with our lives. If you contribute to other people's happiness, you will find the true goal and the true meaning of life."

May the merit of all our practice together be joined with the merit of all the wholesome actions of the three times—past, present, and future. And may all of it together be dedicated to the welfare, the happiness, and the awakening of all beings.

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