Questions and Answers

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:05:20

So this was about the big mind meditation. Why deal with pain? Why investigate clinging, attitudes, mind states, and so forth, if it is so easy? Just hang around in the open nature of mind, let the clouds pass by, and wait for enlightenment.

Well, that's a good question. If it's so easy, why not let it be easy?

As a furtherance of that teaching, I thought I would read just a little bit from a Tibetan teaching about this. It's called "Free and Easy," and it's by Lama Gendun Rinpoche. These are just a few of the stanzas:

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already present in open relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself. There is nothing to do nor undo. Whatever momentarily arises in the body-mind has no real importance at all, has little reality whatsoever. Why identify with it and become attached to it, passing judgment upon it and ourselves? Far better to simply let the entire game happen on its own, springing up and falling back like waves, without changing or manipulating anything. And notice how everything vanishes and reappears, magically, again and again, time without end. Make use of this spaciousness, this freedom and natural ease. Don't search any further. Don't go into the tangled jungle looking for the great awakened elephant who is already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth. Nothing to do or undo. Nothing to force. Nothing to want. And nothing missing. Emaho. Marvelous. Everything happens by itself.

So what's the problem? It would be an interesting question to ask yourselves. If it's that easy—just the settling back, not being identified with what's arising, not clinging, not grasping, letting all conditions arise and pass like this magic show—it is very simple.

The problem seems to be that as simple and easy as it is, we have other habits of mind that are very strong. And so all of the methods, all of the suggestions, all of the investigation, all of the learning we're doing about the nature of our experience is really to come to this place of ease. We do it in part by recognizing the possibility and then in a moment just settling back into the ease.

At other times, and sometimes quite frequently, we really investigate what it is that keeps us from it. We really begin to look at the patterns in the mind. What's the condition? What are the causes behind the grasping? How is that working? How is aversion arising in the mind? Where do we get caught? Where do we get stuck? What are the attitudes?

All the methods that we've been talking about are precisely to unhook. It's not to get something. It's to unhook from the clinging, to unhook from the grasping patterns.

I think it's just helpful to hold the balance of recognizing the possibility of this natural ease of mind that's always there—we can always come back to it—and at the same time, learning and practicing and developing a whole array of skillful means, of tools, to help us unhook when we do get caught, to recognize the patterns that catch us again and again.

It's very helpful to remember the title of that little teaching: "Free and Easy." Sometimes it's helpful to remember it in moments as you go through the day when you feel yourself caught up in a lot of striving. If you can remember this possibility—and it could be expressed in different ways—you could express it just in a little mantra: "It's already here," or "Already aware," or "Already awake." It's a momentary reminder that we're not looking for something in the next moment.

We're actually just wanting to settle back into the awareness that's already here. And that reminder, even just for a moment in the midst of a lot of striving—you can really feel the release in the heart. So then it's just practicing that again and again.

Question: I've been having a lot of repeated material come up around past relationships. It's like the whole history of dating, boyfriends, intimate relationships is coming up. I'm individually experiencing each relationship, seeing it clearly and the role I played in it—a coming to terms with this history, with this process. I'm feeling less of an identity, less attachment to these partners. But then I keep wanting to process the material in a therapeutic way instead of watching it in a Vipassana context. I'm wondering how one holds this kind of process in a Vipassana context without getting caught in a therapeutic cycle, while still honoring the material and the therapeutic quality that arises with it.

I think this, in one way or another, is a fairly common experience, especially on long retreats. Just as our mind gets quiet, a lot of our past history—whether it's about relationships or anything else—really does start to arise, often in a very vivid way. Now, through the power of concentration and mindfulness, we're seeing things and understanding things about what has happened in our lives.

My experience has been that it's particularly therapeutic because when this material comes up in meditation, I'm much less defensive. In the actual situation, I might have been acting out of some position. But in the context of meditation, as things come up—and again, this has been my experience—because the mind is more still, more focused, more concentrated, more open, it's able to see things from various angles, from various sides. And so we do come to different understandings. This is part of, I think, a very helpful process. We're really learning about ourselves at the emotional, psychological level of our lives and our relationships in quite a revealing way.

The danger is that it's fascinating. It's really interesting. And it's easy to just get caught again and again in the story because, of course, we're the star of the story. So what could be more interesting than that?

The question is how to find the balance—how to balance opening to the insights without getting caught in a big self-story and without simply repeating the same stuff over and over again. What I've noticed very

often in my practice is that as different thoughts or feelings come up, especially about things from the past, there will be an initial quality of insight about it. It may be a fresh angle, maybe seeing things I hadn't seen before. But after a not very long time, I notice that the patterns, the thoughts about it, begin to get quite repetitious. I'm just recycling the same thing again and again.

It reminds me—I don't know whether you've had the experience of chewing sugar cane. When you chew sugar cane, the first few chews are quite juicy. You're extracting the juice and it's sweet. And then pretty quickly, it becomes dry pulp. Really dry pulp. And all you want to do—and what one does do—is spit it out.

Notice when these thoughts become dry pulp, when you have been through it for the hundredth time and you're not particularly seeing anything new or different. It's just repeating. Then really bringing out the sword of wisdom can be helpful. Okay, enough. And then seeing the thoughts or the emotions or even the insights that have come in the context of just another arising and passing away.

I want to back up to the beginning of this response. If you can see the thought arising in the Vipassana context right from the beginning, that would be great. In the context of meditation practice, you don't have to intentionally be exploring the psychological level. So if your practice is in a place where the mindfulness is very keen and the concentration is strong, and you're simply seeing it as an arising thought or image or emotion, seeing it as arising and passing—don't stop the process to say, "Oh, let me go into this. Let me explore it." I wouldn't suggest that.

What I had been suggesting was that if you find the mind engaged in understanding that psychological level, there can be a value to it for some time. But don't over-chew. You need to be watchful for this, because these explorations are very seductive. One could spend a lot of time on that level.

Question: In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the phrase repeats: "Thus one observes"—and then it goes through the four foundations of mindfulness. One observes the body, feelings, mind, mind objects. "Thus one observes internally, observes externally, observes both internally and externally." What does internally and externally point to?

That is a common refrain in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—to train the mind to observe the body internally and externally, feelings internally and externally, and so forth.

It's pretty interesting to explore the meaning of this. Obviously "internally," I think, is quite clear—we're being mindful of our own experience. But it's also possible to be mindful of other people's bodies, of other people's feelings, of mind and mind states.

Just as a couple of examples: sometimes I've been on retreat and actually mindfully seeing somebody else walking very mindfully. And so I'm mindful externally of somebody else's body. And that mindfulness, especially when they're being mindful, it's like it catches. You can experience how one's own mind stays very aware.

Or we can be mindful of somebody else's emotions. Suppose somebody is feeling happy, manifesting that in some way, or feeling angry, manifesting that either verbally or not. We just sense it. A common situation would be, in one way or another, to be reactive to that other person's emotion. We like it, we don't like it, we get upset by it, whatever. Mindful externally means we become aware in the other person—oh, anger has arisen, joy has arisen, happiness has arisen—and the mindfulness of that keeps us in a mindful state.

I want to read one teaching from the Buddha, which is a very powerful teaching in this regard. It has to do with what we often discuss in the teachings—there's much said about right speech, and we'll be talking more about this toward the end of the retreat. But there's also a whole teaching on right listening. And so this is really mindful externally.

This is from a sutta in the Middle Length Sayings: "Bhikkhus, 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. 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."

It's not so easy to have our minds remain unaffected, uttering no unskillful words, abiding compassionate for their welfare. When somebody's screaming at us or very angry at us—be happy, be happy.

What's the mechanism that makes this possible? The mechanism is precisely mindfulness externally. We actually become mindful, just as we might watch the anger in our own mind or the fear in our own mind or whatever mind state is arising. We can be mindful: oh, anger has arisen in this other person's mind. Love has arisen. This is the speech that is happening. This speech is true. This speech is untrue. Just being mindful of it.

And in that mindfulness, we're not caught up. We haven't been hooked. And there's a greater possibility then of remaining in that place where our minds are unaffected. We just see. There's a clear discernment. It's not pretending, it's not denying, it's not avoiding. There is that clear discernment: this is the kind of speech that is happening. We're mindful of it—external, somebody else's action. And so that mindfulness is very powerful because it keeps us in balance.

This isn't to necessarily suggest that you spend your whole day watching others, but it can happen. Sometimes quite naturally we're seeing others in the course of a day. Watch to see whether you're being mindful of the four foundations externally or your mind has gone streaming out through the eye door onto the object, creating all kinds of concepts and projections and papañca, which is not an unusual occurrence. But see if you can remember in that situation: yes, I can practice mindfulness of the four foundations. And you might investigate pretty precisely—mindfulness of the body externally, mindfulness of feelings externally, mindfulness of the mind externally—and really see what it is that's arising.

This could go very deep. Because just as the practice of mindfulness internally begins to reveal the selfless nature of phenomena, that it doesn't belong to anybody, it's just elements of mind and body coming into being and passing away—it would be quite amazing and quite a change in the way we relate to other people to see that our experience of other people could also be an awareness of the four foundations arising.

This was one of the great things, probably in studying with many teachers, but it was particularly vivid with Sayadaw U Pandita and practicing with him. One had the very strong feeling in going in for interviews that really all he saw were mental factors.

He just, as one gave the report in interviews, was picking up mental factors. What was arising in the mind? And if they were unwholesome, he wouldn't hesitate to point it out. If they were wholesome, he would be encouraging to cultivate them. But there was no sense of a response to an individual. That was a good example, and it was quite an interesting relationship in that regard. The whole relationship was in the service of ending suffering. It wasn't on a personal level for the most part, especially in the interview context. It was just seeing the factors that arose—which led to suffering, which led to freedom.

So this practice of internal-external is actually very profound. We could maybe get enlightened watching the mental factors of other people. Maybe it would be easier.

Someone asked: What are the telltale signs of a practice that is casual rather than relaxed? And another question: Please speak to how one can know delusion is present.

I put those together because in one way the difference between being casual in one's practice and being relaxed in one's practice has to do with whether delusion is present or not.

I'd like to do a little experiment now. If you would just move your arm and feel the movement. Just feel it with care, but not straining, not forcing. Relaxed. Are you feeling the movement? Is anybody not feeling the movement? It's easy. Relaxed. Simple. But present. That's relaxed. There's real presence. There's that feeling of being embodied. We're really there for it. And it can be—we could be moving quickly, or we could be moving very slowly, and it can be just as relaxed in both cases. But we're there in quite a continuous way.

So the relaxed practice means there's not a striving, there's not a gaining, there's not a looking for anything. It's completely simple. We're feeling the movement, but there.

Casual practice is when we're kind of there. And it would be very helpful for you to notice as you move through the day—you know, you're kind of there. Especially in the transition times, because this is where casual practice can come up a lot. The bell rings at the end of the sitting, maybe you're going to the walking place, or time around meals, or after lunch. Is your attention, is your awareness like this with everything you're doing? It's relaxed. It's not stressful. It's not straining. But there's a quality of precision. There's a quality of exactness. There's a quality of aliveness, as opposed to just going someplace.

In the casual practice, when we're not really there, there's very often delusion present, because in that situation we may not be totally lost in our thoughts, but there is often a pretty steady stream of thoughts that are coming up and carrying us away to some extent or another.

I mentioned this in the first part of the retreat. One time I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita in Nepal and the conditions were really bad. They were among the worst conditions I've ever practiced in. It was like four or five of us just in a bare room on a cement floor right next to the latrine. The food was pretty poor and my mind was pretty grumpy. So I was walking around kind of in a grump. I went in and reported this to Sayadaw, went through this whole thing, and he just had one piece of advice for me. He said, "Be more mindful."

And my first reaction was, "Thanks a lot." It almost felt like a cliché to me. "Oh, well, he doesn't know what else to say. Be more mindful."

But then I went outside and I thought, "Well, he's this great meditation master. Maybe I should follow his advice." So I started walking more mindfully, just in the way I was describing—really feeling the movement. Not straining, not forcing, very relaxed, but really there.

And it was amazing. In that mindfulness, in that fullness of being with experience, the whole grump disappeared. It was like there was no space for it, there was no time for it. And I hadn't realized how much of it was being fed just because I had been practicing casually. I had been walking, kind of present, but really lost in that whole mood.

Do you get a sense of the difference? In the casual practice, there's a lot of delusion going on. Delusion means we're not fully present. We don't know exactly what's happening. Delusion is ignorance. And ignorance is an interesting word in English—ignoring. We're ignoring what's present in one way or another.

So I'd really like to encourage you, especially in these last weeks of the retreat. In one way, they're like the dessert. It's like you've put in all this time and effort in your practice, and even though it may not feel like it—and it may not be the dessert you ordered, the waiter might have gotten it mixed up a little bit—it's the dessert nevertheless. There is a power to your practice that you might not even realize, being in the midst of it.

So it's a very valuable time to really refine your understanding of the difference between casual and relaxed. Because this could truly transform your understanding of the practice. It's the whole day, really the whole day. It's as simple as this. If ever you think you're forgetting, just stop for a moment and move your arm. Just so you remember how simple it is, how easy and how open it can be with that fullness of awareness, fullness of attention. It transforms the quality of the practice. This is not insignificant, so that's why I really want to emphasize it.

A question came in: "What is the Buddhist take on intuition? How would one work with intuition in a

Vipassana context? And how would one tell a real intuitive moment versus simply emotion arising?"

Well, this is an interesting question because—and it may not be exactly what was meant—the whole unfolding path of insight is intuitive, meaning that our insights develop not by thinking about things. Our insights into the nature of our experience happen intuitively, out of paying attention. We're just being mindful, being aware, in this very relaxed but not casual flow. There's just observation, observation, observation. And then all of a sudden, intuitively, we may see things, we may experience things in a new way, in a different way. It might be a sudden experience of impermanence. We're just seeing impermanence deeper, or from another angle. Or it might be an experience of selflessness, or a deeper understanding of the First Noble Truth. But it doesn't come from sitting there thinking about it. It comes intuitively.

There's one Zen teaching that characterizes this intuitive understanding—they call it "a sudden wordless understanding." And that's just what our practice is like. We're going along and we just drop into different levels of perception, different angles, different perspectives. And that, in the Buddhist context, is what's understood as intuitive insight.

The next question is really a whole bunch: "When there is no self, what knows? If there is no self, what is reborn? Who or what gets to carry karma from one lifetime to another? As there appears to be no separate self when looking at awareness, what is the commonality to an incarnation?"

How can I have a past life that belongs to me? It is often referred to as the concept of mind streams, and I am wondering about their nature. To what extent are the mind streams of different people considered to be separate, interdependent, or even inseparable? Does the mind stream of a hermit living all by himself or herself affect other mind streams? And if yes, how?

These questions come up frequently—I think they're the most common. The preface is always the same: "If there's no self, then fill in the blank." Because of all the Buddha's teachings, this is the one that's most counterintuitive. For most people, it doesn't immediately resonate. It's like, what does it mean? Our whole life has been built and lived around the idea of a self. And it's so strongly conditioned in our society and culture, especially in the West, where there's such emphasis on the individual, making this teaching even more challenging to grasp.

To say there's no self does not mean that there isn't a coherent pattern to the unfolding. Selflessness means that there is no underlying, unchanging substrate or reference point that is "me." There's no little seed that's carried through.

An example might help illustrate this. If you plant a seed, and there's water and sun and good soil, the seed germinates and sprouts and grows into a plant and tree. The tree bears fruit, and the fruit has new seeds. Is it that the seed has somehow been carried up into the tree and into the fruit and magically multiplied? No. It has been a process of transformation. This is the process of becoming. Seed, due to

various conditions, becomes this, becomes this, becomes this. Sapling becomes tree, becomes fruit, becomes new seed. The first seed has not been carried over. But this process of transformation is lawful—it's not happening randomly. If you plant an apple seed, you get an apple tree that bears the fruit of apples. You don't get a mango. There's a lawfulness to the unfolding, but there's no one element that is carried through the process. Rather, it's a process of each moment conditioning the next, conditioning the next, conditioning the next.

It's like imprinting a piece of wax with a seal, then taking the seal away. There's nothing in the seal which is carried over into the wax, but the imprint is there. We could think of each moment as imprinting the next, imprinting the next, imprinting the next.

In this understanding, consciousness itself is arising and passing in each moment, along with all of its different mental factors. All of the material elements are arising and passing in each moment. There is a continuity to it, and you could call that—especially the continuity of the moments of consciousness—the mind stream of an individual. When we look at the whole stream, just as we could look at a tree and say, "That's an apple tree," we're understanding that there's no single element that has been permanent in this process.

So what's reborn? It's not that there is a self which is reborn. It's not that there's some element carried over from this life to the next life. But according to the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, it's described simply in the same way that we understand this changing process of becoming within this life—each moment of consciousness conditioning the next. It describes how the moment of death consciousness, the quality of consciousness at the moment of death, conditions the arising of rebirth consciousness. Now, the mechanism for this—you'll have to ask somebody else. But this is how it's described, and it follows in the same way as the process happening within this lifetime.

Whether or not you believe in rebirth, you can see the same process happening moment to moment right here. And that's really part of the whole unfolding of insight through the practice of watching—a dual process, moment after moment, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, this pairwise progression.

What we call self, what we call Joseph, is the pattern. There is a recognizable pattern, and that's there. We don't confuse an apple tree with a mango tree. There's a pattern to the process of becoming which we can recognize, and that is the individual mind stream. There's just no permanent element that's carried through.

So if we want to use the word "self," which we could very well use conventionally, it refers to a particular pattern of changes. It acknowledges the pattern—that's the conventional level of appearance. Yes, there's a self, there's Joseph, there's each one of us. But on the more ultimate level, we see that pattern is an appearance arising out of a flow of momentary changes.

Just to touch on the last part of the question: if mind streams are individual, which they are, how can one mind stream affect another? And they do. As a very simple example, if you walk into a room and somebody is really angry—just really intense angry energy—do we feel it? Of course we feel it. We're affected by everything and everyone around us. This whole web of conditioning is a web of interdependence.

In that situation it's very obvious, and we've all had that experience. It's also true on the other side, when you're with somebody who is really cooled out. This was my experience with many of my teachers, but I think particularly now of Dipa Ma, who was just this incredible being of stillness and peace and love. That's what you felt. You just came into her presence, and the effect was beautiful. She could be sitting still and one would feel that. There is a very powerful effect from how we are.

Did the Buddha talk about a place before stream entry that us lay people can obtain? If so, how did he describe it? Can we call it brook entry?

A couple of things about that. He did, actually—there is a brook entry. But it's also important not to put stream entry too far out of reach. Stream entry is the first real opening in a very deep way to the experience of selflessness. It is what uproots the notion—I think Sharda talked about it the other night—of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality belief, the belief in self. Our insight has matured to a place where we know with certainty, we've seen with certainty, the selfless nature of this process. That's a transforming moment when we really see it without doubt.

But there is something in the texts. It's not actually called brook entry, but it's called *cūḷa sotāpanna*, which means "little sotāpanna," or little stream-enterer. That is the experience when the momentum of mindfulness builds up to a certain extent and we're in the experience of what's called arising and passing away. We're seeing and feeling the very rapid arising and passing of all phenomena. There's a very strong momentum of mindfulness at that time in our practice where it's really going by itself. At that point, there's not real effort required because we've built up the momentum. The mindfulness is just working by itself, seeing moment after moment things arising, passing, arising, passing. It's a very exhilarating time in practice.

It's said that once we have come to that understanding, stream entry is actually inevitable. In a way, we've crossed over a certain threshold, because in the seeing of that rapid arising and passing away, the bonds of self really have been loosened tremendously. Even though there are further insights to unfold, it's really a turning point for us.

This really can develop in practice. It's one of the reasons I emphasized in the beginning the difference between casual and relaxed. It doesn't happen with casual practice, because in casual practice we build up a head of steam and then fall away. We get a little momentum going and then fall back. With relaxed practice, we're really there in a relaxed way, because the relaxation is a key part of it. It's letting go of the striving, the forcing, the efforting. We're relaxing back—very easy, but continuous. We're really present

throughout the day for what we're doing. That's what builds up the momentum of mindfulness, and it's out of that momentum that these insights happen.

There's a question which I'll come to later on, but there's one aspect of it that this would be a good place to address. One of the questions was: what was some of the best advice I got from my teachers early on that helped me in my practice?

Munindra said very often, "In spiritual practice, time is not a factor." Time is not a factor. And for us striving types—"Okay, I'm on this three-month retreat, I've got to get it. There's two and a half weeks left, got to get it"—it's not about time. Time is not a factor.

Can we just put time aside? The Dharma is vast. We're on this vast journey of exploration and discovery. It's not a question of a three-month retreat, and it's not a question of ten three-month retreats. It's just our life. And if we know how to practice, if we know the right way to practice and engage fully—not in a casual manner—the whole path will unfold.

So this is the message for you strivers: just relax, settle back. It's big. It's much bigger than our little striving can do anything with. It's really more surrender to the process, but we need to do our part. And a lot of what we're learning in retreat is what our part is.

A question came in: "What is the difference between craving and wanting? Isn't this suffering because we are craving pleasure? If we want without expectations of either pleasure, pain, or neither, is that still craving? A friend lives in a violent situation. When I send her metta, I use the phrase 'May you be safe and free from danger.' I accept what is but wish things to be different, of more ease for her. Is this wish for her wanting, clinging, grasping?"

This is an important question because the words in English can be very confusing due to their multiple meanings. We use the word *desire* or *wanting* in English in many different ways. In Pali—and this is one of the things I appreciate, though I'm not a Pali linguist, just knowing enough to appreciate the precision of the language in terms of its understanding of the mind—there's much greater clarity. English wasn't developed for that purpose particularly, and so there can be a lot of confusion.

Just a couple of examples. The word *desire* or *wanting* can be associated with craving, with clinging, with attachment, with greed. Here's an image for your mind to recognize when the wanting or desire is of the greed type, the clinging type: just think of Velcro mind. If your mind feels like Velcro, if it's stuck on the object, most likely the greed mental factor is there.

There's another meaning of desire or wanting. In Pali, the word for greed is *lobha*—that's the unskillful state. But another meaning is referred to with the Pali word *chanda*, which is also translated as desire, but it means desire to act, desire to do. This chanda is ethically neutral. Sometimes this desire to act is

associated with greed or with aversion or delusion. But sometimes desire to act is associated with generosity, with metta, with wisdom, with compassion.

So in English we use the same word. "I have a desire for enlightenment. I have a desire for awakening. I have a desire for my friend to be happy, to be easeful." That desire is not lobha, is not greed, is not craving. It's that movement, that energy of wanting to do something, but associated with skillful states.

You need to learn how to discern this. Even though we may use the same word in English—desire or wanting—you really need to discern when that's arising in your mind, when you're feeling a wanting, when you're feeling a desire to do something. Really look to see whether it's the desire of greed, that stickiness of the mind to the object. It's not hard to tell the difference when there's this stickiness versus when wholesome states of mind are present. Check it out. It will be a very useful discernment to bring into your lives.

Because without it, and because of the confusion of language in English, we could easily confuse these states in our minds and not discern the difference. So it's been an important investigation.

The word *craving*—that is almost always associated with lobha, with greed. If we feel a craving, or another word used to describe it is a thirst—

And thirst is a good word because you know that feeling of thirst? There's often that craving quality in the mind. So that's the stickiness. That's the greed mental factor.

Now, there's a question about whether we still call this meditation coming from the Mahasi tradition, since it seems quite far from that at this point. This refers to different traditions of practice in Burma, and for many years we were speaking of it in terms of the Mahasi tradition. Mahasi Sayadaw was Munindraji's teacher, Upandita's teacher—he was a great master who died quite a few years ago.

He did quite a revolutionary thing in Burma. He was the one who, I think more than any other monk, opened up intensive practice for lay people. Because traditionally and historically, it's monks and nuns, renunciates, who did intensive practice, while lay people supported their efforts with dana and generosity and followed the precepts. Mahasi Sayadaw was one of the first who, on a very large scale, saw that lay people could have the same depth of experience as monastics if the situation was created for them to practice. And so hundreds of Mahasi centers were set up in Burma and then around the world.

The things that characterized the Mahasi method: he emphasized for the most part watching the breath at the abdomen, the rising and falling, rather than here at the nostrils. It was an emphasis—he thought that was more helpful, but it was not exclusive. He also very much emphasized the tool of mental noting, where we put a mental label on experience in the service of mindfulness.

Upandita, Sayadaw Upandita, who was a disciple of Mahasi Sayadaw, very much emphasized the effort side. He was a warrior. It was like, kill the defilements—that was the whole metaphor. It's like Buddha in

warrior mode. So for many years we were studying with Sayadaw Upandita and, in some slightly watered-down way, emphasizing that side of things.

There are many other traditions and lineages in Burma. There are over fifty ways of doing Vipassana practice. They're all the cultivation of mindfulness, but from different styles. In these last couple of years, we have been more emphasizing relaxing practices, not the strong effort in that very forceful way. It's effort in a relaxed way, in a continuous way.

But actually this is how Mahasi Sayadaw also taught. When he would give instructions, it wasn't in the progressive way that we did here, where we start with the breath and then a day or two later go to sensations and then slowly build. At his monasteries, you would sit and basically the instruction would be: sit and notice what's happening. He did emphasize the tool of noting, but it was that very open kind of practice—using the breath as a primary object, but being open to whatever arose.

So it's really not a question of Mahasi tradition or some other tradition. The way I see it is just emphasizing different things at different times—whether we're really emphasizing the effort factor in a strong way, emphasizing relaxing back more, using mental noting when it's a useful tool. If it's not working particularly well or you don't find it helpful, there's no need to do it. So I just wouldn't make too much of a distinction here.

There are many more questions, and some of them were great, but it's eight-thirty, and I wanted to end just with this last question: If you could impart one message to our minds before we leave, what would it be?

At first I was kind of wondering, well, what would it be? And then the light bulb went off, and I thought of the Buddha's last words, because what could be a more powerful message? Here's the Buddha, enlightened at thirty-five, for forty-five years wandering northern India, teaching all of these beings—monks and nuns and laypeople. And finally he comes to the end of his life. He's lying, as it's always said, between two trees who, as the legend goes, are flowering out of season.

And what does he say?

His very last words. These words are of import. You can imagine: he's the Buddha, the Awakened One, speaking to so many of his disciples.

He said, "Subject to decay are all conditioned things. All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are changing. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Work out your awakening, your enlightenment, with diligence."

It's really profound. The Buddha is pointing to the essential nature of all phenomena. We get so caught up in the story of our lives, so caught up in our desires and our aversions. And the Buddha is just saying: all of it—all of it—is subject to decay. Everything we're so involved in, everything we think is so important in

our lives, it's all subject to change.

So what is important? Work out your awakening. With diligence. It takes diligence in the midst of this world of change. That word has been translated as diligence, or heedfulness, or care. And so that really is the message for all of us.

We need to hear it again and again, because it's not a message we get out in the world very much. I'm sure you've noticed—many advertisements on the internet or in magazines or newspapers, just little headlines for some enticement or other. They'll say, "Increase your desire." That's a good idea? Our whole society is about that. It's that understanding that increasing your desire is something to aim for.

That's why the Buddha's message is so precious. With such clarity, he saw the nature of this life, the nature of the mind and body. And it's not esoteric. I'm sure you have seen over these weeks and months: all conditioned things are subject to change. Everything we've experienced arises and passes.

Practice with heedfulness, whether it's in the context of a retreat or the context of our lives.

So let's sit for just a couple of moments. Relaxed, easeful, attentive.

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