Joseph's Dharma Story - Part 2

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:07:13

During part one of this retreat, I gave a talk about the beginnings of my own Dharma journey and the many ups and downs of practice in those years. I left off at a point in the early 70s when I first began teaching. I thought tonight I would just pick up the thread of that talk and speak about the years since then—the unfolding path of both practice and teaching since the early 70s. Hopefully it will give you some perspective and perhaps be of some help as you're leaving this time of intensive practice after six weeks or three months and beginning your journey in the world again.

In 1973, I had already been in India for about six or seven years, practicing and studying mostly with my first two teachers, Anagarika Munindra and S. N. Goenkaji. The teaching began very organically. It wasn't like all of a sudden you're teaching. Munindraji suggested, after I had been there for quite some time, that he would just encourage some of the newer meditators to come speak to me if they had questions about their practice. So for a year or so, it was just like that—people would come and ask questions. Then I started leading some discussion groups.

That was interesting because there was one guy in those early groups who was very smart, slightly aggressive, with very challenging questions. Here I was, just beginning to try to share the Dharma, and he was always putting me on the spot with these really difficult questions. So even though it was not easy and not even fun, it was great training.

I was reminded of a story of somebody going to a Zen sword master to be trained. In the first few years, the master had this student just do errands around the temple. After some time, just as the student was wandering around, the Zen master would pop out from behind a bush and whack him on the head. He kept doing this at completely unexpected times until the student had to be aware and alert in every moment. Well, this guy with these questions was a little like that. So I'm actually quite grateful.

After some time of doing that, Munindraji asked me if I would lead a short retreat and give some more formal Dharma talks. I could say that was really the beginning of the formal aspect of teaching. I remember the very first talk I gave, still quite vivid in my mind—it was on bare attention. In that talk, I used a Zen haiku poem, which for many years was sort of my signature haiku on retreats. It has fallen into disuse in these last years, but I thought I would bring it back just for old time's sake. And it's really in response to a question that was asked the other night: What exactly is awareness? What is mindfulness?

This is the haiku. I think it's by Basho. He said, "The old pond, a frog jumps in. Plop."

So awareness, mindfulness, is plop mind. It's not "the old pond, a frog jumps in, what a beautiful evening

it was, it was so romantic." Not a big descriptive thing. Old pond, frog jumps in, plop. Just the sound. To be right in the sound of it. That's mindfulness. That's awareness. So we want to keep plop mind.

In 74, my body started acting up a bit, and I was having a lot of back trouble. I was still in India, but it was really quite difficult. At that time, I decided to come back to the States. I had no idea really what I would do. I had spent basically all of my 20s in Asia—first in the Peace Corps and then practicing and studying in India. So in 74, I was 30 years old, came back, no idea what to do. I ended up traveling across country from upstate New York out to California with some friends.

While I had been in India in just the last few years, I had met Ram Dass in Bodh Gaya and we had become quite friendly. So I get to Berkeley and I thought, well, he may have some ideas of what I might do. He knew of my involvement in the practice. So I called up the place he was staying and I was told that it was one of the days he wasn't seeing people. I mean, I had traveled 3,000 miles, and we were close friends. But it was one of those days. So I said, okay, let's just see what happens.

So I'm walking down the streets of Berkeley, and I had to go to the bathroom. I went into one restaurant, asked if I could use the restroom, and they said no—it was only for customers. Well, coming from India, this was like incomprehensible. So I walked down the street and went into a second restaurant. Can I use the restroom? No. It was pretty amazing. I walked down the street, went into a third restaurant, and there's Ram Dass. Who knows?

So we sit down together, start talking, and he invited me to teach with him the meditation section of a big course he was teaching at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. This was the first summer that Naropa, this Buddhist experiment, this Buddhist college, opened in Boulder. And it was kind of like a Buddhist Woodstock experience—the first gathering of people from all over the country and even the world who were interested in Eastern meditation and philosophy. Ram Dass had this huge class on the Bhagavad Gita. Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching the basics of Vajrayana Buddhism. There was huge excitement. A lot of young people had come there. And I was teaching the meditation section of Ram Dass's class.

It was great. There was so much interest—I was doing maybe six or seven sessions a day. And there were 1,500 people in his class. It was a huge, huge thing. Out of that teaching at Naropa in the summer of 1974, the seeds were planted for the whole Vipassana scene in this country. People got very interested in wanting to pursue the practice.

From that summer of '74, a month-long course was set up in the Sequoia National Forest in California. We had, I don't remember exactly, but thirty-five people, maybe forty people coming for a month there. We were all living in tents. It was a very makeshift operation. Before going down to that retreat, a whole bunch of us were just sleeping on friends' floors in Berkeley. Somebody had this old dilapidated truck. We bought all the food for the retreat, loaded it on the truck. Halfway down to the Sequoia Forest, the truck caught on fire.

But somehow, we were young, full of energy, none of it mattered. There was a tremendous kind of fresh enthusiasm for this incredibly exciting undertaking—a month retreat. None of us had even contemplated doing something like that in this country.

And in those early years, it was a very grassroots kind of movement. There was no organization. It was just a group of people. We'd get together in different places around the country. Let's put on a retreat. We would just be going. Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg at that time and myself, and then later other teachers as well, would just be moving from place to place. It was kind of like a circuit rabbi going around.

After some time of this we thought, it might be nice to have a center where people could come to practice. This was the first intimation of what IMS would become. Little did we know what creating a center would mean. But we had friends living in Massachusetts, and they were looking around for a place. Then in 1975, before this place was found, we had the idea to teach a long retreat. We had done the month-long in Sequoia and then just week or nine-day, ten-day courses. So we had the idea: let's do a three-month course. Many of us had practiced for extended periods in India.

So we rented a place up in Bucksport, Maine—it was a convent, I think, and they were renting the facility. We had a lot of enthusiasm, but we were very naive about what it all meant and how to do it.

In '75, Bob Dylan was beginning his Rolling Thunder concert tour. And unbelievably, he was having a concert in Bangor, Maine during the three-month retreat. What did I know? I had never even been to a rock concert. But I saw Bob Dylan's coming—Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell—let's take all the yogis to the concert! Well, that was my brilliant idea. Fortunately, my colleagues outvoted me. But that's how things were.

It was actually the nuns at Bucksport, at that convent—we were talking about how we were looking for a place, and they suggested contacting the diocese in Worcester, the Catholic diocese. So our friends down here called them, and they had this place. It was run by the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament. There were only twelve priests left in the building, so they really did need to sell. It was this huge place. For us, it was a really big thing—I mean, we were just a bunch of young people recently back from India who didn't really know what we were doing. And even though from the perspective of today's standards it was amazingly cheap—this whole complex on ninety acres of land was $150,000—back then in '75 and '76, $150,000 was enormous. We barely had $100. So it was just this huge thing.

And again, it's just amazing. It feels like this whole journey has been blessed by the devas. A few friends who had a little family money and were actually working—we needed to raise $50,000 for the down payment. And somehow we managed to gather $35,000 from a few different friends. I had no idea where the rest would come from.

So I'm teaching—this was the second summer at Boulder, at Naropa—teaching various classes. I'm just sitting in my apartment, and one day this young woman walks in who had been in one of the classes. She

said, "I just inherited some money. I have $15,000. I don't quite know what to do with it. Do you have any use for it?" Do I have a use for it? So that was the last piece. And this is like just walking in the front door. It does make one wonder just what forces—what dharma forces—there are in the world.

Still, even when we had the money, there was a lot of hesitation to undertake it. It was a huge building needing a lot of maintenance and upkeep, and would people come? I had no idea.

So a few of us were just mulling it over in downtown Barre, when we noticed on some of the monuments in town—and as many of you know, the town motto of Barre is "Tranquil and Alert." Tranquil and alert. It's on the police cars. Tranquil and alert. So if ever we needed a sign...

That was the beginning, the beginning of IMS. We moved in in '76.

The next ten years, we were both really working hard at the center, and I and other teachers were following a very busy teaching schedule all over this country and in many places around the world—in Europe and Australia. There was a lot of teaching activity. It was as if we had just caught the wave in the West of interest in Buddhism. And so it unfolded so organically and so easily.

It all just happened.

But after ten years of this—and it was pretty full on—I began to feel in myself that there was something missing. And I didn't know what.

Sometimes new perspectives can happen in such unexpected ways. I was teaching a retreat in Australia and was watching the 1984 Winter Olympics. In those Olympics, the ice skating team of Torvill and Dean, two British skaters, got a perfect score in their program. They got a perfect ten. It was an amazing, just an amazing performance. And when I saw that, when I was watching that, something—I was just inspired by the possibility of perfection, of bringing anything to perfection, and what that means, and what kind of dedication that means.

So that inspired me to really look at my own life and what I felt was most important and what I would want to bring to perfection if I could. And I realized that I had this unfulfilled aspiration to really do more practice. I had been so busy teaching. I had been sitting every year, usually for a month, but it didn't feel enough.

And it was seeing Torvill and Dean on the ice—yes—that led me to Sayadaw U Pandita.

We had invited him to come in the fall of 1984 for his first visit here, a three-month course, very intensive, as we've told different stories about it. It was really intense. He's a very demanding teacher. At one point I told him that going to interviews with him was like going to the dentist—you know, that same feeling of trepidation going into the interview. So in his next talk he said, "Some yogis think that coming to see me is like going to the dentist."

At one point he had the idea that it would be good for my practice if I just sat, did a long sitting—sat until the pain came and then sit through the pain, get to the end of the pain. So I would sit until the pain. I would be sitting an hour and a half, two hours, two and a half hours, three hours, and then it started to hurt. And I'd be sitting and sitting and sitting and kind of gritting my teeth after a while. And I would always end up changing position. So I would go in and be reporting this to him. And at one point he said, "Don't you have any pride in being a man?" And I must confess that I didn't. It was actually the furthest thing from my mind.

At that time, there were some yogi rooms downstairs in the lower walking room at the far end. During that three-month retreat, I was staying in those rooms. And it was so intense, and there were times of such great difficulty. Remember, this was still in the time of the Cold War. So I'd be sitting, and it was really difficult. And I'd hear the planes come over, and I would think, "Ah! Maybe the Russians are going to bomb. And I'll be able to get up." It wasn't the most compassionate thought in the world for everyone else.

But over the next eight years, I did a lot of retreats with Sayadaw—in this country and in Burma and in Australia. And at a certain point, the relationship really got a lot easier, which was nice.

I remember going in to one interview, and he was still in a little bit of a fierce mode. I reported what was going on, and he just proceeded to point out all the defilements that were in my mind contained right in the report. There was desire and aversion and irritation, whatever it was, judgment. And he just made this list of defilements. And I just started to laugh.

That laugh was a really important moment, because until then I would have heard that and taken it as a judgment and then judged myself—"Oh, look at all these defilements. I'm such a terrible yogi." But somehow I had practiced enough at that point where he just pointed it out and it was the laugh of acknowledgment. Yeah, that's what's there.

And it was so interesting.

As soon as I got lighter with what was in my mind, Sayadaw U Pandita became incredibly lighter in the relationship. It's like he was just waiting for me to lighten up. And so it's really useful to see how we're the ones who are holding the self-judgment, and that it's not necessary.

Sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita really taught me a lot about right effort. Finding the balance slowly—this was over a long period of time—but finding the balance between not coasting on past experience, because we all develop to a certain extent and it's easy to just start coasting, especially if we're in a relatively easy place. So not to coast, to really push the edge, but also not to get caught up in expectation, not to get caught up in that striving mind. And I came to learn in working with Sayadaw that learning the art of right effort is really a lifetime practice. Really learning what right effort is for us at any particular time. When do we need to really push a little bit? When do we need to relax? When do we need to be courageous? When do we need to pull back? This is the art of meditation. This is what we continually need to be looking at.

Sayadaw U Pandita also at this time suggested that I and some of the other teachers who had been studying with him practice more intensively the Brahmaviharas. And that's where we really immersed ourselves in the practice of metta and the other Brahmaviharas. It was very interesting. As you've probably seen in your practice here, for me it took quite a while. At first I would be doing the phrases and doing the practice and not really feel much. And then as the feelings started coming, I would fall into another trap. I would be continually looking to see how I was doing. I'm doing the practice—oh, getting concentrated, oh, metta feelings getting stronger—not at all directed towards the other person. I would be saying the words, "May you be happy, may you be free," while thinking, "How am I doing?" So just to see that tendency of mind and slowly to let go of that.

This was a very valuable time for me in the practice because I began to see more clearly the interconnectedness between Vipassana mindfulness practice and the Brahmaviharas and metta. Instead of seeing them as two completely different things, I really saw how they supported and fed and nurtured each other.

There's one little teaching by Ram Dass's guru, Neem Karoli Baba, who was one of the great saints of India. He had this very pithy teaching. He said, "Do what you do, but don't throw anyone out of your heart." That basically was his teaching. Do whatever you do, but don't throw anyone out of your heart.

How do we accomplish this? We can really do it in two ways. We can do it through the meditation practice of metta and compassion and joy and equanimity, starting with ourselves and finally including everyone, so we don't throw anyone out of our heart. We include everyone. And we can do it from the other side. We can do it from the side of insight, the side of wisdom, when we understand that there is no one here. There is no self here to keep anybody out. The deeper our understanding of selflessness, the more complete is the inclusion of all beings. And so it just becomes very inspiring to see how the metta and the Vipassana work together.

There's another line from a Japanese poem, I think it's by Issa, where he says, "In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger." And to think of our practice as being that. In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger. We do it from the side of metta, becoming inclusive in that way. We do it from the side of wisdom—no one there to be separate.

So this took me to the early 90s, all of these years with Sayadaw U Pandita. But then again, I began to feel something's missing. There's some piece that doesn't yet feel fulfilled. And again, I didn't know what. These cycles themselves are so interesting to me—the cycles of when we're fully engaged in the practice and it feels so complete and so full, and then at a certain point, hmm, maybe there's a piece missing here.

And then that gets filled in and we practice another ten, fifteen years. Oh, maybe something else is missing. It points to the vastness of the Dharma and how we're always just at that edge of what's unknown. And so it's always finding new aspects to practice and understand.

One of my friends at that time, who's now teaching, his name is Lama Surya Das, had been practicing in the Tibetan tradition and had done two of the Tibetan three-year retreats. He invited Sharon and myself and some other friends to go meet some of his teachers in Nepal. So we went on this little tour, and it was my first introduction to the Dzogchen teachings in the Tibetan tradition. We met Tulku Urgyen, who was one of the great masters, and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche.

Dzogchen, sometimes called the Natural Great Perfection, is the practice of learning how to recognize and rest in the open, empty nature of awareness. There's a phrase from the teachings which I've always liked a lot. When they talk about resting in the natural state of awareness, it says, "Rest your weary mind." That's just such a... yes. Let's rest our weary minds.

I was introduced to this practice, and at first I had the idea that it was completely different from Vipassana. As I was practicing, whenever I would find my mind just settling into the familiarity of my Vipassana practice, I would pull myself up short internally and say, "Okay, don't do Vipassana. You're doing Dzogchen." I would fixate on what I thought was just the awareness. Don't know anything else. Just be aware of awareness. That was the attitude in my mind about it. I became fixated on this fabricated state of mind that I was thinking was awareness, that I was taking to be the Natural Great Perfection. Meanwhile, I was in this prison of attachment and fixation.

But over time I saw that clearly this was not the Natural Great Perfection. I was getting tighter and tighter and tighter. Finally my mind began to relax a little bit, and I began to see and to feel how the two perspectives of Dzogchen and Vipassana really blend very well and support each other so easily. I didn't have to make this kind of rigid distinction in my mind.

At this time, there was a really big turning point for me in my practice. It's the one that fulfilled the peace that I had been looking for, that I didn't know I was looking for. And that happened on a two-month Dzogchen retreat that we were actually doing at a Zen monastery in upstate New York. This is American Dharma.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was teaching, and he was giving teachings on bodhicitta. He was talking about relative bodhicitta being compassion, and ultimate or absolute bodhicitta being emptiness. Just in the course of the talk, something clicked in my mind. I was listening to the teachings, and things fell into place in the understanding that compassion and emptiness are not two different things—that compassion is the activity of emptiness.

This was huge for me. It was huge because I somehow had been keeping them separate. An expression of that understanding, which I think we may have mentioned in past weeks, is the teaching by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, "When you recognize the empty nature of phenomena, the selfless nature, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless." Compassion is the activity of emptiness. It just brought things together in the most beautiful way.

This led me to a whole new understanding of the Bodhisattva vows, which are more commonly expressed in the Mahayana tradition, but I had been reading about them for years and years. Just for those of you who may not be familiar, there are many expressions of them, but one expression is: Beings are numberless, I vow to save them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them. Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them. Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.

I had been reading and reflecting on these Bodhisattva vows for a long time.

Beings are numberless. I vow to save them. It seemed like a beautiful idea—and totally impossible. I just didn't see how in the world I could save all beings. It seemed beyond reach. So I simply put them aside. I thought, "Okay, it's a beautiful expression of an aspiration," but there wasn't much personal connection.

But then, with this understanding of bodhichitta—that compassion is the activity of emptiness—suddenly these vows made more sense to me. If we have these aspirations, or similar ones, and they're resting on the shoulders of a self, they're too big. How could a self ever fulfill these? But if we see that compassionate activity is just the working of selflessness, of emptiness—not based on or resting on any notion of self—it's simply the activity of Dharma, the activity of empty phenomena, the activity of wisdom. Then it becomes a way of life unfolding. It's not self-centered.

This was really a big turning point. I was happily settling into this new fulfillment of bringing bodhichitta—the whole heart space of bodhichitta—into the practice of vipassana, and to the extent I was doing a little Dzogchen practice, it all became one. Bodhichitta had filled out a missing piece for me.

But then a big spiritual crisis was suddenly looming on the horizon. I realized that my Burmese teachers and my Tibetan teachers were saying quite different things about the nature of reality, the nature of freedom, the nature of awakening. In the Burmese teachings, freedom—ultimate freedom—transcends even awareness. Awareness itself is seen as a conditioned phenomenon, and Nibbana, ultimate truth, transcends even awareness. While in the Tibetan Dzogchen teachings, and also in some of the Thai forest tradition, they have a different perspective where pure awareness is freedom.

Freedom transcends awareness. Freedom is awareness. These were great teachers, people I had tremendous respect for, people who I felt were realized—not speaking just philosophically or theoretically, but people who I felt had really experienced the truth—saying opposite things about what I felt to be most important in my life. This was a crisis. What to do?

I became plagued by the question—and really plagued: who's right? Because I thought, if what the Burmese teachers are saying is right, these Tibetan teachings must be wrong. And if the Tibetan teachings are right, these Burmese teachings must be wrong. My mind was tormenting me, going back and forth. I was trying to figure it out with my mind, trying to figure it out intellectually, thinking that if somehow I could just think it through, then I would know.

I was on this one two-month retreat. The first month of the retreat, my mind was completely engaged with

this dilemma, and it was tormenting. I felt like my whole spiritual path depended on a resolution of this. It was a very, very vivid time.

The resolution finally came when I realized that I was asking the wrong question. The question "who's right?" was not the right one. So I reframed the question. Instead of trying to figure out who was right, I asked: Is there one Dharma of liberation that contains them both, that embraces them both?

This led me to two understandings. Just by reframing the question, all of a sudden I could drop out of that polarity. Is there one Dharma of liberation that embraces both points of view? This led me to two understandings.

The first understanding was truly important: with respect to the fully awakened mind, I didn't know. I simply didn't know. I knew what the Tibetan teachings said, I knew what the Burmese teachings said, but I myself didn't know. And that not knowing was tremendously freeing. I framed it as a little mantra for myself: "Who knows?" But it wasn't the "who knows" of confusion. It wasn't the "who knows" of bewilderment. It was the "who knows" of openness. I realized I don't know. Relax. Just settle back. Do the practice. And let it unfold. That was the first understanding, and it was so helpful.

The second understanding enabled me to settle back into a variety of practices. It was the realization that all the teachings from all the different sides and all the different traditions really are skillful means for liberating the mind, not statements of ultimate truth. I had been taking the teachings as being statements of ultimate truth. Of course, if another teaching says the opposite, there's going to be a problem. But if we take all teachings as skillful means for liberating the mind, then we simply have to ask the very pragmatic question: do they work? Even quite opposing teachings can each serve to liberate the mind.

There are a few images that express this, because I think it's a very important understanding to integrate into our practice. The famous example: when there's a finger pointing at the moon, what should we look at? It's useless to look at the finger. The finger is pointing to something. The teachings are pointing to something. Are we attached to the words, or are we actually looking at what they're pointing to?

The writer Wei Wu Wei had another little aphorism. He said, "Disciples, devotees—what are most of them doing? Worshipping the teapot instead of drinking the tea." It's so easy to worship the teapot, to get attached to the teapot. "My teapot is better than your teapot. It's older, it's more beautiful..." It's not the teapot. We want to be drinking the tea.

I framed this whole understanding for myself in a little phrase: metaphysics as skillful means. Instead of metaphysics as statements of ultimate truth, all the metaphysical systems and teachings become skillful means. So then instead of pitting one against the other, we simply ask: Is this teaching helping to free the mind from greed and hatred and delusion? Then it's helpful. Is this teaching helping to cultivate greater wisdom and love and compassion? The metaphysical underpinnings really don't matter. They are all skillful means, and that's the measure we need to apply.

This made it possible to open to, to learn from, to practice from many different angles and many different sides, because I could see them all as skillful means for liberating the heart. And all the traditions converge in an understanding of what it is that liberates the heart. The metaphysics may be very different. The concepts may be very different. But all the Buddhist traditions—and perhaps many other spiritual traditions as well—converge in the understanding that the heart is liberated through non-clinging. That is the nature of the free mind. The Buddha expressed it very clearly: nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. This is not only an instruction for practice; it is a description of the liberated mind, the mind free of clinging.

So now when people ask me what I practice—do you practice Vipassana, do you practice Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Dzogchen—I say: I practice non-clinging. Everything else is simply a skillful means to support us in that practice.

So this was the Dzogchen period. There's the early India period, there's the Sayadaw U Pandita period, and there's the Dzogchen period.

In recent years, I've been studying with some other Burmese sayadaws—Pa Auk Sayadaw and Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Again, it's just so interesting because they're quite different, with very different methods and emphases in practice. Yet in the practice of each of them, I see how they both support each other.

The work with concentration under Pa Auk Sayadaw supports the stability of awareness, the continuity of awareness that U Tejaniya emphasizes. And the checking of attitude that U Tejaniya stresses over and over again—"check the attitude in the mind," which we've been emphasizing a lot—helped me tremendously in the practice of concentration. Because as I was doing that practice and watching my attitude, I noticed a little striving. When I checked the attitude, the mind relaxed. It concentrated more easily. So everything fits together. That's the great beauty of the Dharma.

Last year I was on sabbatical for a year, not teaching. I did a long retreat, a five-month retreat. Right in the middle, I had a few sittings—and you probably know from your time here, sometimes you just have a couple of sittings and everything falls into place. Well, I had a few sittings like that where all of these different teachings—the Vipassana teachings and my understanding of Dzogchen and Zen and Tejaniya and the concentration practice—all just fell into this beautiful whole. W-H-O-L-E. Maybe it would have been better if it had fallen into a hole!

It all began with a reflection on the Buddha's Enlightenment song. You know the famous house builder quote? After his enlightenment, the tradition says he uttered this in his heart—not necessarily out loud, but this is what came to his mind. I wrote it down. It says: "O house builder, house builder of self, you have now been seen. You will build no house again. The rafters are broken, the ridge pole shattered. My mind has attained the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving."

So that came to mind. We've talked about this a little bit during the retreat—the power of that statement:

"Achieved is the end of craving." What an amazingly simple and direct expression of the enlightened mind. This is what the Buddha is saying directly after his attainment of Buddhahood. It's very unambiguous: attained is the unconditioned, achieved is the end of craving.

In those sittings on retreat, something shifted for me. Instead of taking that to be some far-off attainment that maybe someday, through practice, we'll come to the end of craving, I saw that it was really a practice in the moment. Moment to moment, we can be watching, we can be seeing: in this moment, is the mind craving? Is it reaching out? Is it grasping? Or not? Craving... not craving.

We can begin to experience at least a taste of the freedom the Buddha talked about, even if it's just for a moment. We may have a long way to go until we've achieved the final end of craving, but in the moment we can really have that taste. I would suggest for all of us in our practice to hold that understanding very deeply and be watching moment to moment: what is the heart, the heart-mind, doing? Is there that movement of craving toward the object, or not?

Then I reflected on the Dzogchen teachings about the nature of mind, the nature of awareness. And it's really saying the same thing. There are teachings in the Dzogchen tradition that say, "Awareness means the wisdom mind free of clinging." It says, "If you don't cling, whatever arises is naturally freed." It's the same thing. So we could say, in that tradition, *rigpa*—the term used for the nature of mind, the empty nature of awareness—is the mind of no craving, the mind of no clinging. That's what we come back to.

In Vipassana, we stop clinging. We train ourselves to let go of clinging through a refined perception of the three characteristics. We see the impermanence, the unreliability, the selflessness. We see there's nothing to cling to, and so the mind drops back. On the Dzogchen side, or in some of the Thai tradition, we recognize...

The nature of that awareness that's not clinging—and then we practice stabilizing it. We're simply approaching it from two different sides to accomplish the same thing.

This speaks again to that image of ice and water that I mentioned last week. Craving, clinging is ice. Water is the mind of not clinging, unobstructed. So we just watch, moment after moment.

But as I said, sometimes we think it's water, we think it's not clinging, but it's not. This can be a subtle fixation—what I call "slush mind." Subtle fixation, subtle attachment, subtle identification with awareness itself.

This is a very subtle place to really begin to see. Even as everything is flowing, unobstructed—all the objects, thoughts and sensations, the breath, sounds, the whole world is flowing, empty of self—that last corner of the mind, the last holdout of fixation, is the identification we have with the knowing, with the awareness. "Well, that's who I am." So we reify the awareness.

In the last few minutes of this talk, I want to suggest ways of cutting through this identification with

awareness. It's very interesting and very subtle.

A well-known contemporary Tibetan master, Trungpa Rinpoche, said: "The failure to recognize the mind's true nature, the empty nature of mind, occurs because the empty aspect of the mind's nature is not recognized due to the appearance of its lucid aspect."

What does this mean? It means that as we're looking at the nature of mind, the knowing aspect, the cognizing aspect, is much more apparent than the empty aspect. So that's what the mind fixates on. That's what we identify with. The awareness aspect obscures the empty aspect.

So what to do about this? There are a few little teachings that point directly to this understanding. I feel this is just the piece that can really open up something for us. And it all begins in the way of practice where we're looking at our minds. We're looking at the mind, looking for the mind—and not finding anything. When we look for our minds: "Oh, there it is!" No. There's nothing to find.

As one teacher said, the not finding anything when we look for the mind—that moment of not finding anything is the finding. Pay attention to the experience in that moment of looking for the mind and not finding. What is that moment like?

Here is a little poem from the Chinese, translated by Thomas Merton, called "Starlight and Non-Being." Starlight is going off in search of non-being. We are starlight. That's us—in search of non-being.

So she kept her gaze fixed on the deep void. All day long she looked and she saw nothing. She listened, but she heard nothing. She reached out to grasp and grasped nothing.

Then Starlight exclaimed at last, "This is it! This is the furthest yet. Who can reach it?"

Remember—looking for non-being. "And if on top of all this, non-being is, who can understand it?"

Looking for the mind, looking for non-being. Nothing to find, nothing to grasp, nothing to see, nothing to hear. We look for the mind. That moment of not finding—pay attention to that moment.

One more little teaching, in case you missed it on this one. This is the last chance this time around.

Keep in mind that with all these teachings, sometimes we really do have a sudden recognition, and sometimes not. Sometimes it may even be confusing—what is this all about? But these are all seeds. I've had so many times when I'd be sitting and something would come to mind that I had heard weeks or months or years ago. When the conditions are right, that little piece comes up and is understood. So you don't have to be concerned. If it's meaningful to you now, fine. If it's not meaningful, let it be a seed.

Sometimes this recognition of the empty nature of awareness comes just like that, and sometimes it's after years and years of struggle. There's a famous exchange between Bodhidharma, who is said to have brought Buddhism from India to China, and the one who would become his first disciple, Huike.

Bodhidharma is sitting in his cave—he was one of these fierce old Zen masters—facing a wall for seven years. And Huike, who has been searching and searching, struggling and suffering, sits outside the cave beseeching Bodhidharma to teach him. He was really suffering.

Finally, Bodhidharma comes out and says, "What's the problem?"

Huike says, "I've been suffering so much. Please give me the teachings. Please pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind."

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

And Bodhidharma says, "There—it's already pacified."

The not finding is the finding. Understanding the empty nature, it's already pacified. Nothing more to do. Except remember.

It was all in this last period of retreat, just in this last year, that all of these pieces came together—from the Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths and the end of craving being the end of suffering, from the Dzogchen point of view of the empty nature of mind, from the Zen point of view and the teachings on no-mind. It all comes together. The Dharma is this multifaceted jewel, and we can learn from so many different sides and different aspects.

I'd like to close with some advice from another Tibetan teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul. 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 is up to you.

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