Foundations of Practice

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 59:34

I first became interested in the Buddha's teachings when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. This goes back quite a few years—it was in the mid-60s, and I spent two years there. Just as a kind of introduction, I would be going to discussion groups at some of the temples.

When I came back to the States after my two years in Thailand, I tried to practice by myself and realized very quickly that I needed a teacher. I hadn't gotten much meditation instruction, and trying to figure it all out by myself led to a lot of confusion. So I went back to Asia, stopping in India on the way, going to various places and teachers that I had heard of, a couple of ashrams in northern India. I finally ended up in Bodh Gaya, which, as you know, is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. And it's there that I met my first teacher, Anagarika Munindraji. He had just returned from nine years in Burma, practicing and studying.

At one point, very early on, we were sitting on the roof of this place called the Burmese Vihara. It was a place made for Burmese pilgrims, but at that time Burma was closed, so there weren't any pilgrims, and only the few Westerners who were there at the time were staying. We were sitting on this flat roof, a few of us with Munindraji, and he went around asking each one of us why we wanted to practice, why we had come to India. At that time there were very few Westerners who were there to study meditation. People gave various reasons, but for me the reason was very clear. It really was the possibility of awakening. That's what drew me to go back to India to study the teachings.

Then Munindraji went on to explain the basic Vipassana practice. As soon as he started talking about it and just giving the outline of the meditation, I felt immediately at home. It was such a direct, simple, common sense approach to understanding. Something he said really captured my interest and fueled my commitment. He said, "If you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it." It seemed so obvious—how else can we understand our minds except by observing them? There were no rituals, there was nothing to join. It was just: sit down and look at what's happening.

So it's this very simple, direct, immediate approach to understanding the nature of our minds. What are the patterns that cause suffering? What are the patterns that lead to peace, that lead to happiness? This is what inspired me to really devote many years to this practice—the simple but not always easy practice of Vipassana. Vipassana is a Pali word which literally means "seeing clearly." When people ask what kind of meditation you're practicing, you can say, "I'm practicing seeing clearly meditation," because that's really what it's about. And that has many important implications, which we'll get into.

All of the practices of Vipassana are rooted in one discourse of the Buddha. It's called the Satipaṭṭhāna

Sutta, the Satipaṭṭhāna discourse. Satipaṭṭhāna, a Pali word, is often translated as "the four foundations of mindfulness," or it can be translated as "the four ways of establishing mindfulness."

The Buddha begins this discourse, this very fundamental teaching of meditation practice, with a very bold and unambiguous statement. I'd like to read these first lines of this sutta:

"Bhikkhus"—and again, bhikkhus refers to anyone walking on the path, so he's really talking to us here—"Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha, of suffering and discontent, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbāna, namely the four satipaṭṭhānas."

This is a very simple, direct statement of what this practice is about. Given the magnitude and the import of this declaration, I thought it would be useful to explore some aspects of this teaching from the Satipaṭṭhāna discourse in some detail.

What's amazing as we either hear or read this teaching is that we find all of the quite vast amount of teachings of the Buddha really are contained within it—and it's only a few pages long. One of the amazing aspects of the Buddha's genius is that when you open any doorway into the Dharma, you approach it from any side and open the doorway, and as you enter, all of the aspects of the Dharma are revealed. That's very obvious as we read and study this particular discourse.

So the Buddha began the sutta by declaring, "This is the direct path to awakening." He then goes on to point out what the four fields are—they're called the four pastures—for our mindfulness. Where do we apply our mindfulness? What are the areas that we should be looking at and exploring?

So the Buddha goes on, and it's very explicit. He says, "What are the four? Here, bhikkhus, in regard to the body, abide contemplating the body, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to feelings, the second satipaṭṭhāna, abide contemplating feelings, ardent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to the mind, abide contemplating the mind, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to dhammas"—which here means the different categories of experience, like the hindrances, like the factors of enlightenment, like the Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths—"in regard to all these categories of experience, abide contemplating dhammas, ardent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world."

So what do our minds do when we hear this? I've found that as part of our cultural attention deficit disorder, often in reading or hearing the suttas, whenever I come across a lot of repetitions where the same phrases, the same words are repeated again and again, my mind tends to skip over them. I think, "Oh, I've heard that already. I heard it with the first foundation, and the second, and the third, and the fourth, repeating the same thing."

But there is another possibility. When the Buddha repeats some phrase—the same phrase—with each of

these four fields of mindfulness—"the bhikkhu abides ardent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent"—perhaps he is trying to tell us something, that these qualities are important and that we need to develop them in our practice. So I'll go with the second assumption, that there's a reason the Buddha repeated them again and again: because they are important. We need to understand them. We need to integrate them into our practice.

So what does "ardent" mean? Think of the feeling of ardor the first time you fell in love, or you thought you did. Just that feeling of ardor—there's that powerful, sustained energy, and there's this tremendous warmth of feeling. There's a passionate and strong enthusiasm and interest. We can't stop thinking of the person. The mind is consumed in a way by the ardor, by the passion. Can we cultivate those very same qualities in our love of the Dharma, in our love of the truth? Can we be ardent in this practice and generate that feeling of passion, of enthusiasm, of warmth?

The question is, through all the many ups and downs of practice—times when it's easy and times when it's difficult and challenging—how can we sustain and nourish this feeling of ardor? How do we have this feeling grow in us, given that the Buddha said it was such an important component of the spiritual path?

There are a few reflections which help to generate this spirit, this ardent energy within us. The first is to reflect on the purpose and benefits of our practice. The Dharma and the teachings are a jewel of priceless value. When we understand the lawful unfolding of conditions—which is really what the Dharma is about, that conditions in ourselves, in other people, in the world, in life, things are happening lawfully, conditions are arising because of certain causes—when we understand this, then we see that the Dharma, the understanding of this lawfulness, is the source of every happiness in our lives. We understand what conditions bring about worldly pleasures. And the Buddha talked about this as well. He didn't only talk about renunciation of sense desire; he talked about the delights of worldly pleasures, and then went on to discuss the drawbacks of them. But there is a way of understanding what brings worldly happiness, worldly pleasure. And there's a way of understanding what brings the highest realization of peace.

This is from the writings of a monk in the Thai forest tradition in Thailand, Ajahn Mun, who was one of the very great masters. He was the grandfather, in a sense, of the Thai forest tradition, a reputed arahant and quite a remarkable being. He said, "Of all the many things that people value and care for in the world, the mind is the most precious. In fact, the mind is the foremost treasure in the whole world. So be sure to look after it well. To realize the mind's true nature is to realize the Dhamma. Understanding the mind is the same as understanding Dhamma. Once the mind is known, then Dhamma in its entirety is known. Arriving at the truth about one's mind is the attainment of nibbāna. Clearly the mind is a priceless possession that should never be overlooked."

So this is not something outside of us that we have to look for.

I presume we all have minds. The mind is there already. It is this priceless jewel, this priceless possession. And understanding it is the understanding of the Dharma. Reflecting on this generates tremendous

interest and fascination. How is this mind working?

We can also reflect on the rarity in the world of connecting with and having the opportunity to practice teachings that lead to liberation. Not many people in the world have the conditions come together where they even hear the teachings or have the opportunity to practice them. One of the great Tibetan masters of the last century said, ask yourself how many of the billions of inhabitants on this planet have any idea of how rare it is to be born a human being. Just that—how rare it is to be born a human being. How many of those who understand the rarity of human birth ever think of using that chance to practice the Dharma? How many of those who think of practice actually do practice? How many of those who start continue?

It's quite amazing when you reflect upon what we're all doing here. Reflecting on our commitment to practice, we can begin to appreciate the strength of the paramis, that powerful inner urge that brought us all here. This is not many people's idea of a vacation. If you go up to people and say, "How would you like to spend six weeks or three months in silence, eat two meals a day, and not speak?" So there's something going on that makes us all value this as much as we do. There's some powerful force in the mind. It's rare. This is not a usual undertaking.

When we reflect on this, it really can bring about a lot of joy, a lot of self-respect, a lot of respect for our fellow yogis. We realize the depth and the strength of this urge, this desire, this willingness to practice. Even in times of difficulty, in times when you feel challenged, reflecting on this strength that is there—it's what brought you here—arouses this feeling of ardor, of passion, of connection.

We strengthen the quality of ardor by reflecting on and seeing clearly the transiency, the impermanence of all phenomena. When we look at all of the things that we identify with, when we look at all of the things that we think are important and become attached to—could be people in our lives, maybe it's possessions, maybe it's certain feelings or emotions, maybe it's different states or conditions, experiences in the body—when we look at that but then put it in the context of the understanding of impermanence, we see that nothing we have, no one in our lives, no state of mind is exempt from this great truth of change. No force in the world can prevent the process of growth, decay, and death. Because that is the Dharma, that is the lawful nature of things.

When we don't understand deeply, when we don't see clearly the transiency, the changing nature of all conditioned things—that whatever arises internally, externally, in the body, in the mind, whatever arises has the nature to pass away—then we devote ourselves and our lives and our energies, and even our meditation practice, just to wanting to collect things, to desiring other people or possessions or meditative experiences. We get caught up in the various appearances of samsara, in the movie-like dramas of our minds. How many have arisen in just these few days? We're sitting here with the intention to pay attention, the intention to be aware, and yet we see how seductive are all these stories. And in that seduction, we are solidifying even further the sense of self, the sense of "I."

There's a wonderful dialogue between one of the very great Tibetan Dzogchen masters, I think of the 18th

century—some time ago. His name was Shabkar. A conversation between Shabkar and a flower. It's a little long, but it's really a lovely conversation.

Another day I went for some fresh air to a meadow covered with flowers. While singing and remaining in a state of awareness, I noticed among the profusion of flowers spread out before me one particular flower waving gently on its long stem and giving out a sweet fragrance. As it swayed from side to side, I heard this song in the rustling of its petals:

"Listen to me, mountain dweller. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but in fact you even lack awareness of impermanence and death, let alone any realization of emptiness. For those with such awareness, all phenomena teach impermanence and death. I, the flower, now will give you, the yogi, a bit of helpful advice.

"A flower born in a meadow, I enjoy perfect happiness with my brightly colored petals in full bloom, surrounded by an eager cloud of bees. I dance gaily, swaying with the wind. When a fine rain falls, my petals wrap around me, and when the sun shines, I open like a smile. Right now I look well enough, but I won't last long—not at all. Unwelcome frost will dull the vivid colors till turning brown I wither. Later still, winds violent and merciless will tear me apart until I turn to dust."

You, hermit, are of the same nature. Surrounded by a host of disciples, you enjoy a fine complexion. Your body of flesh and blood is full of life. When others praise you, you dance with joy. Right now, you look well enough, but you won't last long—not at all. Unhealthy aging will steal away your healthy vigor. Your hair will whiten and your back will grow bent. When touched by the merciless hands of illness and death, you will leave this world for the next life. Since you, mountain-roaming hermit, and I, a mountain-born flower, are mountain friends, I have offered you these words of good advice."

Then the flower fell silent and remained still.

In reply, I sang, "Oh brilliant exquisite flower, your discourse on impermanence is wonderful indeed. But what shall the two of us do? Is there nothing that can be done?"

The flower replied, "Among all the activities of samsara, there is not one that is lasting. Whatever is born will die. Whatever is joined will come apart. Whatever is gathered will disperse. Whatever is high will fall. Having considered this, I resolve not to be attached to these lush meadows, even now in the full glory of my display, even as my petals unfold in splendor. You too, while strong and fit, should abandon your clinging, meditate in solitude, seek the pure field of freedom, the great serenity."

I love that. Everything is teaching us. If we really open our eyes, everything is teaching us. So the awareness of change reminds us of the purpose of our practice. What are we doing? What choices are we making?

One time, years ago, I was doing a long retreat and I got into a little pattern of getting lost over and over

again in recurring fantasies. And it was kind of nice. When you're lost in fantasies, you forget the discomfort in the body and the time goes quickly. That was fun. But at a certain point—it just kept going on and on—I remember I said, "Joseph, do you want to think or do you want to get enlightened?" It's just a way of reminding ourselves: What am I doing here? What's the purpose in my being here? Do I just want to keep indulging in these thoughts and fantasies? Or do I really want to see clearly? Do I want to wake up?

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves, and the awareness of impermanence can be a prompt for that reminder. What is our purpose in being here? What really creates that sense of ardency?

The second quality the Buddha emphasized—beside ardor, by contemplating the four satipaṭṭhānas with ardor—is called in Pali *sampajañña*, which means "clearly knowing" or "fully aware" or "seeing something precisely or thoroughly from all sides." This clearly knowing means the ability to comprehend in a full way, in a comprehensive way, what is taking place.

So again, from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta:

"Again, bhikkhus, when going forward and returning, act clearly knowing. When looking ahead and looking away, act clearly knowing. When bending or straightening the limbs, act clearly knowing. When wearing robes and carrying bowls, act clearly knowing. When eating, drinking, consuming food and tasting, act clearly knowing. When defecating and urinating, act clearly knowing. When walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking and keeping silent, act clearly knowing."

Did you get it? Act clearly knowing.

I think it might be helpful, being on retreat, to explicitly add or include some activities that either impact our fellow yogis or are places where we often get distracted. So we might add to the Buddha's words here: when opening and closing doors, act clearly knowing.

When entering or leaving the hall, act clearly knowing. When doing the yogi job, act clearly knowing. When alone in one's room, act clearly knowing. When going from one place to another, act clearly knowing.

When clear comprehension is present, when we're cultivating this aspect of the teaching, it enables us to assess the suitability of an action. What is the motivation? Where is this action leading? Is it beneficial or not? Is it the right time?

As an example, in one context you're doing walking meditation, walking very slowly and feeling just the most subtle changing nature of the sensations. It can be so precise and exact and soft and easeful. But when you're on the lunch line and there are fifty people behind you—moving, moving, moving—that's not clear comprehension. We've lost the context of the experience.

So this is what clear comprehension means. It enlarges the scope. It's not only that we're narrowly

focused; we take in the bigger picture. It begins to include the context of our actions so we can see what is appropriate at this time, what is suitable.

In the sutta, "a bhikkhu abides ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful." Mindful is the third of these qualities that the Buddha mentions which are necessary for awakening. And in fact, mindfulness is really at the heart of all Buddhist practice. Mindfulness is the translation of the Pali word *sati*. This quality of *sati* , or mindfulness, holds a central place in every Buddhist tradition. It's not limited to Theravada or Vipassana practice. Mindfulness is the key quality in every path of awakening. It's what makes any spiritual path possible.

For some time, I was practicing a little bit in the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition with a very great teacher. His name was Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. And he wrote this kind of ode to mindfulness. So this is from another whole tradition:

Mindfulness is the root of Dharma.
Mindfulness is the body of practice.
Mindfulness is the fortress of the mind.
Mindfulness is the aid to the wisdom of innate wakefulness.
Lack of mindfulness will allow the negative forces to overcome you.
Without mindfulness you will be swept away by laziness.
Lack of mindfulness is the creator of evil deeds.
Without mindfulness and presence of mind, nothing can be accomplished.
Without mindfulness, you are a heartless zombie, a walking corpse.
Dear Dharma friends, please be mindful.
By the aspiration of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, may all Dharma friends attain stable mindfulness and ascend the throne of perfect awakening.

Without mindfulness, we are just caught up in the stories of our mind. And so it's the key element. It's the root of every practice of awakening.

But this function, this *sati*, is a very nuanced and powerful mental factor. The word mindfulness in English really doesn't do it justice because mindfulness is kind of a prosaic word. And yet the function of this factor in the mind is tremendously powerful.

Most literally, *sati* means remembering. That's the most literal meaning of the word. And this remembering can refer to different things. It can be remembering what is wholesome and unwholesome—so that's a powerful function of *sati*, enabling us to remember and make wise choices. It can refer to the recollections, the meditative recollections of the Buddha or the Dharma, the Sangha, or the remembering of one's past skillful actions, both of which become means for arousing energy and rapture within us, different ways of uplifting the mind.

Of course, sometimes the powerful Western habit of self-judgment can co-opt these very skillful reflections. One time I was in Burma, and I was there for a while, going through a hard patch. I was just kind of slogging away day after day, and nothing much seemed to be happening. It was hot, and it was just difficult. So Sayadaw U Pandita, hoping to lift my spirits, said, "Joseph, you should reflect on your sila."

Thinking, yeah, I'd reflect on my past wholesome actions, and I'd feel good. Well, he said, reflect on your sila. And my first thought was, what did I do wrong? My immediate response was a kind of self-judgment. So we need to use these reflections skillfully.

But most fundamental to our practice, sati, or remembering, is really the remembering of the present moment. This is how we apply mindfulness in our practice. Mindfulness means present moment awareness, presence of mind, wakefulness. It's the opposite of being absent-minded or forgetful.

So how do we recognize—how do we get very specific in our recognition of what this experience of mindfulness actually is? Because we hear the words, and we may try to fit them somehow to our experience. But how can we know very specifically, yes, this is what mindfulness means?

It's actually very simple. I'm sure you're familiar with the experience, whether sitting or walking or going through the day, of being lost in a thought. Is there anybody here who hasn't been lost in a thought? Doubtful. So we all have that experience. We're lost in a thought, lost, lost, lost. And then at a certain moment, we awaken from being lost. We remember that we've been thinking. You're familiar with that moment of waking up from being lost.

That moment is very important. Don't rush back to some other object of meditation. Don't rush back to the breath or the body. In that transition from being lost to being awake, right in that moment, the nature of mindfulness, of awareness, of wakefulness is totally illuminated because the difference in the experience is so clear. We've just gone from being lost and then in a moment we're awake. Take a moment to recognize that—oh yes, this is what awareness means, this is what mindfulness means.

This happens many, many times a day. So instead of the usual pattern of being lost, lost, and then we're awake, and then we have a self-judgment about having been lost—instead of going down that track—lost, lost, lost, awake, take delight in the moment of wakefulness. Take delight in the recognition of wakefulness. Then many times a day you will be having moments of delight instead of moments of self-judgment. Because for as many times as you get lost, that many times do you awaken.

So it's a powerful moment. Generally, people skip over it. Really take the moment to see, to recognize, oh yes, this is the experience of awareness. Use it. It suffuses the day with these moments of wakefulness and recognition and appreciation of them.

In yesterday's instruction on the mindfulness of breathing, the Buddha emphasized yet another aspect of mindfulness. We talked about the different kinds of remembering and the remembering in the present moment. Sometimes we say that mindfulness means living in the present, living in the moment. That

would be a common understanding of mindfulness, but it is not really enough. It's much more than living in the moment.

There's a state of mind that I call black lab consciousness. Do you have a picture in your mind of black labs, the dogs? It could actually be any dog or animal, but I like black labs because they're just so funny. They're totally delightful creatures, kind of going along totally led by their nose, here and there. But you could have that same understanding watching squirrels or any animal, the birds. They're living in the moment. They are in the present. They are knowing the present moment experience. But they're not being mindful. I don't know of a single mindful black lab.

So it's more than simply living in the present. We need to understand what that "more" is.

That's why in the Buddha's instruction on the breath he gives an indication: when breathing in long or breathing out long, or short, the instruction was, "I understand I'm breathing in long, I'm breathing out long. I understand I'm breathing in short, breathing out short." It's that word *understanding* which suggests that mindfulness has a very close association with wisdom. It's not just going through life like a black lab living in the moment. We have to be in the moment with understanding. That's the great gift of mindfulness. That's the power of mindfulness. It's not simply being in the moment—it's understanding the momentary experience, understanding what is happening.

There's a Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa. I was reading a collection of his poems and there was one which totally captured my interest. The title of the poem was "Live, You Say, in the Present." I thought, oh, that's a good Buddhist poem. These are the first four lines:

Live, you say, in the present.
Live only in the present.
But I don't want the present.
I want reality.

That's a whole other dimension, and this is the dimension of yes, live in the present, but it must be associated with understanding. It must be associated with wisdom. That's the nature of mindfulness.

So you can see, I hope, that this is a very rich and powerful function of the mind. This is what we're cultivating. And it's this difference which points to an important distinction in how we practice—the difference between being relaxed and being casual.

We've talked a lot about the importance of relaxation, that really settling back, relaxing, opening up, that this is a foundation of the practice. But people, often for quite a while, can confuse relaxation or get it mixed up with a casual attitude toward the practice. It's what I call "more or less mindful"—I'm kind of there. It's like we're skimming the surface, connected somewhat, but with a somewhat casual attitude.

It's the difference between a rock which drops to the bottom of a pond and a cork which bobs along on the

surface. The casual attitude is like the cork—yeah, I'm here. But mindfulness is like the rock that drops to the depth.

So as you're moving about or sitting, it can be very relaxed. You want to cultivate that relaxation, the letting go of the grip, the striving, the expectation. But in that relaxation, settle deeply into your experience. And you will see very clearly the difference.

When you're walking—and you can especially notice it walking from place to place—so often the mind is just ahead of itself. We're walking and we're kind of aware that we're walking, but we are not feeling each step as a unique experience. We're walking with a slight inner lean to where we're going.

So keep in mind this meaning of mindfulness. It's the sinking into the depth. And it really just comes about from remembering. It's not hard to do. It's just remembering to do it. And so that's how all these aspects of *sati*, the meaning of *sati*, come together.

This mental factor of mindfulness has a tremendous power in our lives, and there is a long list of its benefits. One of the benefits of being mindful is that it acts as a guardian of the sense doors. It restrains the mind from—this is the Pali word—*papañca*. And *papañca* means all of those proliferating thoughts in the mind.

You know how one thought leads to the next, to the next, to the next, and before we know it, we're engrossed in some story. Guarding the sense doors does not mean closing the sense doors down. It's not closing the senses. Rather, mindfulness serves the function of being aware of what's arising at each of the sense doors. We're actually there for the experience.

I'll give you an example of the power of mindfulness in this aspect of guarding the sense doors. For many years, when I was on retreat in various places, I would notice that whenever I went into the dining room at mealtime—where there's a lot of activity, a lot of people, a lot going on—I would notice the tendency of my mind to go out through the eye door, landing on everything I was seeing, whether it was other people or the food or whatever. My attention was going out through the eye door, landing on these different objects, and then having all kinds of comments and judgments. There was a certain period in my practice where I noticed my mind had a comment about almost everybody—about what they were wearing, how they were walking, how much food they were taking. Ridiculous. But that's what I was doing.

After a while of noticing this was happening, I tried to understand why. It's so fruitless. And I realized it was happening because I was not being mindful of seeing. All of that was happening because the mind was going out to what was seen, landing out there, creating all of these thoughts. All I had to do was settle back, let mindfulness exercise its function in the sense of guarding the sense door, and notice, note, that I was seeing.

So I would go into the dining room, and I made this a practice the whole time, from the moment I went in until I sat down at the table with my food. I would simply note seeing. That's all I was mindful of. Seeing,

seeing, seeing. It was amazing. First of all, my eyes were not popping out of my head. The eyes got very soft and relaxed, and I was just receiving the sights rather than going out to them. I was just seeing color and form, and I would recognize what it was. It cut the comments, the judging, the desires by ninety-nine percent—because I was being mindful of that particular sense door. You can do the same thing with hearing, with tasting. This is a function of mindfulness. It brings us back to the very basis of our experience, and it guards us from this tremendous tendency toward proliferation.

Besides being a guardian of the sense doors, mindfulness also has the function, it's said, of standing near the mind, of serving and guarding the mind. I just like the image. Think of the mind as the royal presence within us, and mindfulness serves and guards and protects this precious mind of ours. Mindfulness brings us face to face with whatever's arising, with whatever is appearing—rather than just these sidelong glances about what's happening. Mindfulness is right there. We see so clearly the thoughts and the emotions and the intentions and motivations, whatever is arising in our mind.

In street talk, we might say that mindfulness is watching our backs. It's protecting us. But in reflecting on this, I thought more accurately we should say it's watching our front, so that we're not so seduced by all the arising appearances and phenomena.

With mindfulness, we become more aware of what's arising in our hearts and minds, and we're able to make wiser choices. Otherwise, without mindfulness, without sati, without this function in the mind, what happens? We're just living out, acting out our own particular habit patterns, our own particular conditioning. That's what our lives are. Mindfulness is this tremendously liberating force because it enables us to see: Oh, this is arising. Is this a benefit? Is it of none? Do I cultivate it? Do I abandon it?

Ajahn Sumedho, the wonderful American monk in the Thai tradition, had a great expression, and it really runs counter to so much of new age spirituality, where the message is often, "Follow your heart." Ajahn Sumedho had a different take. He said, "It's not a question of following your heart, it's a question of training your heart." And anybody who has watched their hearts for any period of time will know that our hearts are not—I think I speak for most of us—they are not unalloyed goodness.

We have a lot going on in our hearts—a lot of beautiful qualities and a lot of things that are not so beautiful. So it's not simply a question of following our hearts. It's a question of understanding, of seeing clearly, and then training our hearts in goodness.

All of this is the power of mindfulness. This is the function of mindfulness. And it's why the Buddha gave so much emphasis to this as the quality to cultivate in our practice. Nyanaponika Thera, who was one of the very early Western monks in Sri Lanka—he was from Germany—wrote a classic book called *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. It's a book about mindfulness, because this is the heart of all our practice.

I'd like to close with some comments written in letters from second graders who were part of a program called the Mindful Schools Program in Petaluma, California. A friend of ours went into the schools and

started teaching mindfulness, in this case to second graders. Some months later, he went back for a follow-up and received letters from these young children. Here are a few excerpts:

"Mindfulness helps me get better grades."

"I enjoyed mindfulness. Mindfulness helps me calm down when I get upset. It also helps me with sports and helps me to go to sleep at night."

Just remember, these are second graders.

"Thank you for doing mindfulness. I love it."

"Mindfulness helped me to be more happy at school."

"Thank you for teaching mindfulness. Mindfulness changed my life."

"Mindfulness makes me calm and feel nice. It is so very fun."

"Mindfulness is the best thing I have done in my life—my long life."

"Mindfulness really gets me calm. I love mindfulness."

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