Q&A: Faith, Effort, Mettā, Lay Practice, and Fear

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So again, there were very many questions, and I grouped several of them together around some central themes. Sometimes as I read the various questions, you may not exactly see what they have in common—I might not either. In first reading they seemed to go together.

This was the first group: "It is my impression that when you speak of having faith, you are not talking about worshipping the Buddha or seeing him as a god, as some traditions seem to do. Will you clarify what you do mean by having faith?" "Can you further explain the phrase, 'the Dharma protects those that protect the Dharma'?" "Could you explain some of the rituals like bowing and chanting?" "Why do we pay homage to the enlightened one if there is no self? Isn't that affirming identity and encouraging comparison?" And, "How is taking refuge different from clinging and attachment?"

I thought it would be interesting to talk a little bit about what faith means in the context of the Buddhist tradition and in the context of our meditation practice. As we know, in this country, in the West, and maybe around the world in different places, the word faith can mean so many different things. It can mean belief in a dogma. It can be a belief based on what we hear or what somebody says or some book—we have faith in that.

For myself, when I reflect on what faith means for me in this practice, it's really faith in the lawfulness of phenomena, which is another expression or meaning of the term Dharma. Dharma means law. It means that things are happening in our lives lawfully. When we understand this lawful process, we can live in alignment with it, in harmony with it. When we don't understand it, then we're at odds and often in conflict.

Faith in this sense is not very different than the faith we might have in the law of gravity. Does anybody not have faith in that? We just experience it daily as a basic law of existence. Things work in a certain way, and when we understand how they work, we're not at odds, not in struggle with that lawfulness.

One of the most basic laws to come into harmony with is the law of karma—the understanding that our actions have consequences. When we understand that when we act based on greed, hatred, and delusion, it has the results of suffering, and when we act based on generosity, love, kindness, and wisdom, it brings happiness—this is one of the basic laws the Buddha expressed.

We can, to at least some extent, check that out in our lives. And this is where the great hook of the Dharma

operates. Because once we have some sense of this, what are you going to do? Go be more greedy? Really fill yourself with hatred? It doesn't make sense. Once we understand the mind and see for ourselves—this is not a question of blind belief, this is a question of investigating for ourselves—what are the consequences of these different mindsets? What brings happiness? What brings suffering? When we see that, then we have faith in the Dharma.

That's what the faith is about. It's not faith in some supernatural being; it's just faith in how things work. You could say faith in the truth.

So when we pay respects to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or take refuge, really what we're doing is acknowledging our faith in the lawfulness of phenomena. We're acknowledging that yes, the mind has the potential to awaken. When we come in and bow to the Buddha—and people bow in various ways, or not, or just sit—we're not bowing to a statue, as some people might think from the outside. It's just a representation of a possibility. It's a representation of understanding.

And we're acknowledging or we're respecting, yes, there is a lawfulness, there is a possibility of awakening. We're paying respect to that. So that's how I understand what faith means in this tradition.

So what were the three most valuable things you learned from practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita? One often hears teachers describe extreme or heroic practices, which are then not recommended. However, these extreme practices seem to give momentum for getting back to balance and have been part of the practice life of some of our most successful meditators. In my own life, the more extreme things often lead to the greatest openings—confusion. What is right effort? How does one deepen one's practice?

The most valuable things I learned from practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita—I think at the top of the list must be an expanded sense of what right effort means. Because he's definitely of the warrior school. And I'm by temperament of the comfort school. My practice had gotten quite comfortable, you know, after the initial struggles which everybody has. But I had been practicing long enough, so I was just kind of cruising along and enjoying it. It seemed to be going well.

And then I met Sayadaw U Pandita. He so encourages—and it's his style, and it's not a style that suits everybody—but for me at that time, it was very helpful. He really pushed. He pushed the yogis to make efforts that went way beyond my comfort zone. The schedule that he laid out for us was basically: you should be spending fourteen hours a day sitting and walking. Well, you think about twenty-four hours in a day, that leaves ten hours. Seven hours for sleep, and that's generous. That still leaves enough hours for eating and other things. But it's not so easy to rack up those fourteen hours when you're really keeping track. It used to annoy me no end at the end of retreat when I found that some of my colleagues were counting the dharma talks as one of their hours. It had never occurred to me. So again, he had this very high bar.

Another aspect of how he worked, which was very demanding—he emphasized to a very high extent the

quality of precision, precision of reporting. We would have to go in and really report in quite an accurate way. We felt the breath, the rising, the falling. What did we actually feel? Not just that we were with it, but what was felt in it. The pressure, the expansion, the tightness—what is felt in the falling?

I spent weeks doing walking meditation because we would have to report in that way about the walking as well. I could feel pretty well what I felt in the lifting and then in the coming down. But in the moving forward, that movement through the air—I knew I was moving, but I could not figure out how I knew I was moving, what it was that I was actually feeling in that movement. Maybe you're better at this than I am and so know right away, but it took me weeks to realize, oh, that's what that sensation is. So that's the kind of precision that he was asking for and inspired in the practice.

The caution in this—and this is, I think, one of the great challenges for everybody on the spiritual path—is to find out for oneself, to experiment for oneself, how we can be at the forward edge of effort without forcing. Because it's very easy, especially if people have the tendency—which probably none of you have—but the tendency towards self-judgment. This can be a setup for self-judgment and feeling we're not doing it well enough, we're not good yogis, and just all of that.

So it's a very delicate undertaking, just to explore, each one of us in our own way. It's not going to look the same for each one of us. But what does it mean just to extend past our comfort zone in practice? Just to push those edges, to push those boundaries a little bit, but without forcing, without going to the self-judgment—out of interest. It's just that sense: we're in this amazing environment now where all you have to do is explore awareness. That's your only job. So what a gift. You don't have any other responsibilities. It's an amazing gift you've given to yourself to have this time. Your only job is to see, to explore: what is the nature of awareness? Where do I get lost?

How do I get lost? How can I extend the edges, the boundaries of what I'm comfortable with?

This takes a lot of delicacy. We have to watch and see: Can I push here a little bit? Oh, that's a little too much—I need to sit back, I need to relax. If I'm getting too uptight in trying to be precise, then the move is to open up, to settle back and relax. There's not any one prescription, but it is useful to energize this quality of interest. Now we're really interested in what's happening.

There was one retreat I was on in Burma. I was very fired up to practice, and I remember having the feeling that I did not want to waste a single moment. My practice has not always been like that—there were times when I haven't had that intensity of interest—but it was illuminating to experience it at that time, to see: Oh yes, that's possible. I think probably in part, at least, because it was in Burma and it was hard to get there and required a lot, so I wanted to make the best use of the time. That's the quality I really learned from Sayadaw U Pandita—to arouse this fire of passionate interest in awareness, in understanding our minds, in understanding our lives.

Just as a little anecdote about the dangers of cross-cultural communication: This was when Sayadaw was

here, and a lot of us were practicing with him, practicing very hard, trying to do that fourteen hours a day, not sleeping much. We were really pushing ourselves. And then at the end of every interview, he would say, "Try harder." And here we were killing ourselves. Try harder. Some of us just let that go in and out. Some of us went completely neurotic around this and caused a lot of self-judgment. How can I try harder? I'm doing my best! It turns out that what was actually said in Burmese was simply, "Please continue." We didn't find this out till years later, after being driven crazy by "try harder."

So again, this whole question of right effort is a very delicate matter. We need to explore how we can do it in balance. When do we push? When do we settle back? When do we aim for more precision? When do we open up? It's all an exploration.

Several questions have come in: To whom do we send mettā if nobody is there? Doesn't the practice reinforce a sense of me, or something which receives mettā? Do you have a definition of love that is a useful conceptual frame in your practice? The deeper I get into my meditation practice—becoming non-attached, having non-desire—the more isolated this path seems to feel. Why? And: I think you said compassion is the expression of emptiness. Can you explain that?

These questions really have to do with understanding the quality of mettā, how it's cultivated in our practice, both in mettā practice and in vipassanā, and the relationship of mettā to insight—to the insight of selflessness.

A very useful framework for understanding not only the Buddha's teachings but also the application of them in our lives is the framework of what are called the two truths: relative truth and ultimate truth. We operate on both of these levels. Just as an example: you look at this, and what do we see? We see a bell. It's solid, we strike it, and there's a sound that comes out. We're using it; it's functional. So we're relating to it as a bell, and this is just the ordinary, conventional, relative understanding of our lives.

If we looked at this under a high-powered microscope, "bell" would disappear. I've never looked at it under a high-powered microscope, so I don't know what we'd see—but it wouldn't be "bell." If we could look deeply enough, perhaps on a subatomic particle level, it's a whole different level of reality. But that reality is not separate from bell. The relative and what we could call the more ultimate levels exist in union. It's not that the ultimate level is here and bell is over there.

It's the same reality seen from different levels.

This is very important because if we separate the two, then we get into all kinds of spiritual disengagement from our lives. We begin thinking, "Oh yes, I'm cultivating emptiness because that's the ultimate, and the conventional is just something inferior over here." No, it's a union. We're operating on both levels, and we need to operate skillfully on both levels.

So when we cultivate metta in the form of wishing well to ourselves, wishing well to others, this feeling of goodwill—goodwill to ourselves, goodwill to others—that is on the relative level. We are using the concept

of self, of I, of other, of being. Those are the terms, those are the concepts that are appropriate and meaningful on the relative level, so there's no problem. May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be free of enmity, may you. This is a level we operate on, and for the most part we operate on this level most of the time.

In the practice of Vipassana, we begin to give ourselves access to another level of experience, the more ultimate level where the concepts disappear, the solidity of things disappears, bell disappears, self disappears, Joseph disappears, and we begin to experience, as Sally was talking about last night—we experience what we call self on the relative level as the play of aggregates, changing, arising, and passing in each moment where there's no solidity.

On that level, to use the conventional phrases of metta doesn't make sense. It's the wrong level. We wouldn't say, "May the perception aggregate be happy." "May vedana be happy." I remember we'd like vedana to be happy. No, it's a misuse of those concepts. It's on the wrong level.

But then the interesting question arises: what's the relationship of the two? How does our understanding of emptiness, emptiness of self, the more ultimate level—how does that inform our life on the relative level, where we're mostly living?

And here's where it gets very interesting. Through the practice of meditation and deepening insight into the selfless nature of this process—that it is just the aggregates arising and passing, this empty phenomena rolling on—as we loosen our attachment to the view of self, and even more important, we loosen our attachment to the felt sense of self, then we're not defending anything. We don't have to live defensively. We begin to see there's not a self here that needs to be gratified or protected or defended or aggrandized.

Through seeing the emptiness of self, the feeling of metta, the feeling of goodwill, arises naturally because there's not a separation which is occurring on this level of self and other.

This was expressed beautifully by one of the great Tibetan meditation masters, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, "When you realize the empty nature of phenomena, the selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

I had a powerful moment of what I would call transformative understanding on one retreat I was doing with a Tibetan teacher named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He was giving talks on bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is the term—literally it means awakened mind or awakened heart. It refers on the relative level to compassion and on the more ultimate level to the wisdom of emptiness.

I had read and heard for years about the bodhisattva vows, these vows of compassion to help liberate all beings. They were very inspiring, but it felt completely out of range. How in the world could I ever liberate all beings? It was a nice idea, but I just couldn't connect with the actuality of it and what it could even mean.

But as Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was talking about bodhichitta, something shifted in my mind. As he was teaching, I began to understand that compassion is the activity of emptiness. Compassion is the manifestation of selflessness.

When we are abiding, hopefully increasingly, in that understanding of emptiness of self, we begin to see that that understanding naturally manifests as love and compassion. And so then the bodhisattva vows took on a whole different meaning. It's not that—and they never could—rest on the shoulders of a self. It doesn't make sense. How could a self ever liberate all beings? But when we understand that the expression of emptiness is compassion, then it's the Dharma saving all beings, it's emptiness saving all beings, it's compassion saving all beings without reference to anyone doing it.

That opened the whole possibility of a life dedicated to that.

Does that seem clear to you? Because it was so powerful for me to take it off of the shoulders of self and to see that the wisdom of emptiness manifests as this. The energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless. The deeper our wisdom of selflessness, of emptiness.

And so this is how metta, which is expressed on the relative level, and emptiness, which is the wisdom of the ultimate level—where there are interfaces, it becomes a union. It's not two different things.

A student asks: "When I really start to see clearly the truth of the Dhamma—the three marks of existence, four noble truths—the things that I thought were most important and meaningful—family, husband, children, career—seem less important, almost empty. But I'm not ready to give up my life. So how do we balance practice and truth with a lay life? Basically, how can I hold both the ultimate truth of the Dharma and the mundane realities of day-to-day life?"

Another writes: "I am a relatively young person. I often worry about how to relate to many of the things we are renouncing here, such as art, current affairs, and romance, when the retreat ends. Do you have any advice on how to be a lay Buddhist in a modern Western culture?"

And another asks: "Not much has been said about human sexuality. How does it fit in with the teaching? Can making love be done mindfully? It seems that sex is driven by desire. Therefore, can it ever be wholesome or wisdom-filled? Or perhaps only when the motivation is procreation?"

These are important questions for everyone. There's often a misunderstanding of the teachings that in order to be free, we have to renounce pleasant experience. That is a complete misunderstanding. First of all, it's impossible. We're living in a sense world, and as we all know, our life experience is made up of pleasant things, unpleasant things, some neutral things. And even if we wanted to renounce pleasure, what would that mean? Are you going to go around with your eyes closed and your ears closed and your body in a suit of armor? So it's a completely mistaken view of what it is that we're practicing.

The nature of freedom is not about renouncing the pleasant. The nature of freedom is renouncing or

letting go of attachment to the pleasant. These are two very different things.

It's interesting—even in English, there are a couple of words that often get confused, and I think it's important to understand the difference between detachment and non-attachment. In English, the word detachment—and people often associate that with the Buddha's teachings, "you have to become detached"—but the connotation of detachment is a kind of withdrawal, a pulling back from experience. Whereas non-attachment suggests being right there in experience without holding on. That's quite different than detachment.

So this is the framework of understanding. The Buddha taught to a wide range of people. He taught lay men and women. He taught monks. He taught nuns. And the teachings varied according to whom he was teaching. When we think about renunciation—renunciation of attachment—the level or practice of renunciation will be different whether we're leading a lay life or a monastic life. The monastics have some hundreds of rules, which are basically about renunciation. For lay people—and the Buddha acknowledged this, he taught for lay people who realized that in our worldly life, we are not going to be living the life of a monastic renunciate.

And so there are sense pleasure enjoyments that are perfectly allowable. It's just part of a natural lay life. What the Buddha did was to point out that as we're engaged, as we're living the life—whether it's of sexual pleasure or food or any other aesthetic pleasure—as lay people, the guidelines are to be able to enjoy those pleasures within certain limits, the limits being where we're not causing harm to ourselves or others. These are the basic moral precepts that we undertake.

So it's a framework. And it's interesting just to consider the difference when you hear the words—I'll just try this on for size—

When you hear the phrase "making love" alongside the word "lust," in my mind it conjures up two very different things, although sometimes they get conflated. But the renunciation that might be appropriate for a lay person is the renunciation, we could say, of addictive lust—where we're driven by sexual desire, which, as we know, can be so powerful, often driving people's entire lives.

For a monk or nun, they're renouncing it altogether, the acting on it. For lay people, it's not renouncing the expression of that energy, but it is creating certain limits. Is this skillful? Is this leading to harmony? Is it an expression of love? Or are we being driven by an addictive quality of lust? We need to see that this becomes our practice.

It's very interesting on retreat, where we are living temporarily similar to monks and nuns—this is like a temporary monastery—to explore what we can learn about sexual desire in a context where we're not giving expression to it. Because I'm sure that simply by being here, it hasn't meant that you haven't felt any desire. The desire arises in the mind, regardless of our environment. So the question is, what can we learn about that energy which will serve us in the context of our lay life, where we do give expression to

it? This has been very interesting for me, and I think for anybody really looking at their minds and this energy.

Just a few examples and arenas of investigation. There's one kind of desire that arises in the mind as fantasies. Sexual fantasies are very seductive. You're sitting here and you look so peaceful—who knows what's going on inside? So how do we relate when there's a sexual fantasy arising in the mind that's so seductive and we get pulled into it? That's a chance to see: can we be mindful of it? Can we be aware of it and learn not to be identified with it? We can play with many different skillful means to do this.

Let me mention a few that I found useful—you'll find your own—in those periods in my practice where this was arising frequently. A fantasy would arise in my mind, maybe one that I had gone through a hundred times already. So I started putting up a sign in my mind: "Dead End." Because I knew this isn't going any place. I'll go down this road, and it's just a dead end, and I'm back to the breath. After being down that dead end so many times, I decided to put the sign up right at the beginning to remind myself this is not going anywhere. And it helped. It helped free the mind from being seduced by something that I could see was not serving any purpose. That was one little tool I used.

Another tool I found very helpful goes to the precision aspect of the practice. When these fantasies were arising, I would be noting "pleasant, pleasant," and sometimes I'd note "seeing" if it was visual images—seeing, pleasant—but it didn't do it. I would note it, but the note didn't get where the real hook was for me. Then, just in being interested in this and seeing how my mind was getting so caught in these fantasies again and again, I reflected on the law of dependent origination. The links, as you probably know, start with contact, then feeling, then desire or craving. The contact is the first contact with the image—that's the contact. Then there's the feeling tone to it, which is pleasant.

What I started doing was making a double note. Every time that image would arise, I would note "contact, pleasant"—contact, pleasant. It was amazing. Just the addition of that little bit of mindfulness acknowledging contact with the image, pleasant—it was like hitting the right acupuncture point. The identification with it released; it just washed through.

I'm using these as a few examples. You'll want to explore when the mind is caught up in this kind of desire. This is really worth looking at, because if we don't have the freedom here to see how these fantasies arise and have some choice about whether we follow them or not, then we're not going to have much freedom of choice out in the world as the fantasies arise. We'll be much more inclined just to act—at least act when we can—whether appropriate or not. So there's a lot to learn here about the nature of desire in the mind.

Another powerful arena for me in this area was not so much the fantasies that arose in the mind, but the feeling that sometimes happens in meditation, especially as our practice has opened a bit and the energy in our bodies is flowing. Sometimes what happens is there are rushes of sexual energy in the body. You can be sitting, and these tremendous rushes come—and they're very enjoyable. Over years of practice, just

watching this phenomenon and watching my changing relationship to it, at first I was thrilled.

Oh boy. Now I know why people like to meditate. It's like this blissful sexual energy filling the body. So for a while, I was just really sinking into it and even encouraging it.

But after some time, again realizing: this is just not going any place. It's very enjoyable, but it's not serving the practice. It's not serving freedom. It's not serving peace. But I needed to go through it to actually realize that for myself.

Then I went through another phase. Whenever that energy started to arise, I'd think, "Oh, just don't bother me." I would kind of push it away and didn't want to have to deal with it. So that was a whole phase of resistance or aversion to it, because it felt like it was disturbing the meditation. It took some time to realize that's not it either.

And finally it came to the place of real equanimity. These feelings would come up. It was fine. My mind wasn't drawn to them. It wasn't pushing them away. There was just this openness, impartiality, and then that energy came and went. It was not a disturbance. It was just another part of the passing show.

I say all this because this is a powerful energy. It arises in our meditation practice, and obviously it arises very powerfully in our lives. We need to understand it. We need to come into a wise and skillful relationship to it. And as lay people, we can express it. We can enjoy that domain of relationships. But can we bring wisdom to it?

You can extrapolate from this particular example. I've emphasized the relationship to sexual energy, but it really has to do with all the other pleasures of the senses that we enjoy in the world. There's nothing wrong in the enjoyment of them, but are we enjoying them wisely, or are they becoming a source of suffering? That's our challenge as lay practitioners. We have to be very awake in these domains.

Someone asks about fear: "How do we free ourselves from fear? I am scared of getting old. I do not see how one could not have this fear with all the aches and pains to come. I am not particularly attached to my body or life right now—I could take it or leave it—but I am scared of all the extra stuff I will have to deal with in thirty years. I have recognized this as aversion, and I realize everyone must age, but that doesn't help the fears. Any suggestions?"

Another person writes: "In my own mind, fear leads to many things depending on the situation. Fear may lead to clinging or aversion. Sometimes it leads to thinking, planning, or to delusion. Sometimes it just hangs around as a seeming response to the uncontrollability of the world. How do we free ourselves?"

As I talked about last week, fear is a very deeply conditioned force in the mind. We need to learn how to relate to it in a skillful way so that it doesn't debilitate our lives. And it's interesting—the first question is really about anticipated fear. It's worth noticing how often our fears are about things that are not here in the moment, but things that we imagine will happen.

Let me back up a bit. The primary way of working with fear—and this I mentioned in the talk last week—is to become accepting of the feeling itself. We need to practice this. Mostly fear is such a problem in our lives because we're so resistant to feeling that emotion. It's very painful. It's uncomfortable. We don't like it. And so we'll do all kinds of things not to feel fear.

Our practice is to learn to become okay with feeling fear. It is okay to feel it. It's uncomfortable, just like feeling a pain in the knee or the back is uncomfortable, unpleasant—but it's okay. We can make space for it. We can open to it. We can work the same way with the unpleasantness of this particular emotion. The little mantra becomes: "It's okay. It's okay. Let me feel it. It's okay." We coach ourselves. We remind ourselves to soften, to allow.

What's so interesting in this practice and in life is that the things we resist, we are feeding by the very resistance. We think that if we resist the fear and try to keep it out, that will provide some kind of safety or refuge, that we'll be okay. But actually, the resistance to fear is exactly what strengthens it. We're giving it energy. So it's not an effective strategy for working with it—it's counterproductive. We can hear this teaching, but we need to discover it for ourselves. As fear arises: "This is okay. Let me feel it." Then we begin to see that yes, it's another passing emotion. It arises, it's a mind state, it's there, it's uncomfortable, it's painful—and it passes. This is the foundation.

As was mentioned, when we are not accepting of fear, it drives us to so many other mind states and emotions and actions. I was once teaching at a retreat for lawyers, law students, and law professors—teaching mindfulness. In one of the discussion groups, a second-year law student said something very interesting. They were talking about the adversarial nature of that profession, with a lot of intense emotion. He shared that he had to get angry in these confrontations in order not to feel the fear. I thought that was interesting. The notion in his mind was that if he felt the fear, it would be weakening, that somehow he would be giving up his strength, and so in order not to feel the fear, it got expressed or vented as anger.

It's a mistaken notion. Actually, the acceptance of fear provides tremendous strength because we're not putting all this energy into resistance. We can just allow ourselves to feel it and then act appropriately.

There's a beautiful statement by the great artist Georgia O'Keeffe that expresses what it's like when we can accept fear. She said, "I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life, and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do."

We have the notion that fear necessarily limits us. It does not need to limit us. If we are accepting of the emotion the way we would accept sadness or anger or joy—it's just another mind state—if we can become accepting of it, we can act right in the midst of fear. We can do whatever we think is appropriate to do. We can take appropriate action.

I had an experience of this. I was with friends on Hawaii, on the island of Kauai. There's this beautiful

eleven-mile hike on the North Shore into the Kalalau Valley. It's just up and down and up and down cliffs, and then we camped for a week in that remote valley. There were high cliffs, and one of the friends I was with grew up in Hawaii. He was very familiar with climbing them. I looked at those cliffs and thought, "Where's the elevator?" It was daunting. There wasn't a path up—it was just raw cliff face. But I was a lot younger then, and he was very enthusiastic, so I just went along. Like Georgia O'Keeffe, I was really terrified the whole way up.

And it didn't matter. It was just a great lesson for me in seeing that yes, the fear is here, even the terror is here, and I can still do what I want to do. So that was very liberating—that we don't have to be limited by this feeling if we're willing to accept the feeling. That's the basic foundation of working with fear and freeing ourselves from it.

One other piece about this projection of fear about future events. There's been a lot of research—neuroscience research and psychological testing research—about the nature of happiness and people's beliefs about happiness. The conclusion from this research, and I'll just read from this: "Studies have shown that we systematically overestimate the degree to which good and bad experiences will affect us. Changes in wealth, health, age, marital status, et cetera, tend not to matter as much as we think they will. And yet we make our most important decisions in life based on these inaccurate assumptions."

This is very interesting, especially with regard to fear. We're looking ahead, we may be anticipating all these things, thinking that they're going to have a major material effect on our lives, and it turns out that they don't.

There was further research, brain neuroscience research, suggesting that we each have a set point—a happiness set point. Even when very good things happen and we feel elated, we quickly come back to the set point. When very bad things happen, we're upset by them and maybe suffer a bit, but again, we quickly come back to our set point. So our fears about what might happen affecting our happiness are not very accurate.

Now, the very good news. Mostly, researchers had thought that the set point in people is fixed—that through our conditioning and our birth, we each have our set point and that's it for life. What they found through meditation research, the research on meditators, is that the set point changes. Through meditation, we actually set a higher set point of happiness. And the more we meditate, the higher that set point becomes. So meditate away.

Knowing this, I feel that so many of our fears do come up, and a lot are anticipated. But we have to understand the actual process of our lives. What are the causes of happiness? We shouldn't be deluded into thinking that some of these things we may be fearing matter very much, when they end up not mattering very much. It has much more to do with that set point of understanding and metta and compassion. These are the qualities that we can cultivate in our hearts and minds.

There were many more things to say, but this might be a good place to end. Let's sit for a few moments.

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