Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:00:12

Some nice, easy questions. At least to start with. I was asked this morning to define some terminology: mindfulness, consciousness, awareness. We actually had a little discussion about this among ourselves today, and I think to a large extent we're in agreement and would use the terms in the same way.

Consciousness is that basic quality, the simplest quality of knowing a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch. It's just the bare cognizing faculty. I think what illustrates the difference between consciousness and mindfulness in a clear way is something I've called "black lab consciousness." Are you familiar with black labs, the dogs? It could be any dog, but black labs are particularly funny to watch. They're running around, literally following their nose, just seeming to be having a good time. They're conscious—they're knowing the smells and the sights and the sounds. They're not unconscious. But they don't really look mindful. When you're watching them, it's not as if there's a mindfulness or a knowing of what they're knowing. They're just in that bare experience of knowing the different sense objects.

So mindfulness is like a step—I know they would say a step back or above—where we know what we're knowing. An example which you're all very familiar with, and which I think again illustrates the quality of mindfulness, is one we've talked about a lot in the different instructions. When you have been lost in a thought, at that time we're conscious, not unconscious. Even if somebody asked what we were thinking, we would be able to tell them. But when we're lost in the thought, we're not mindful of the fact that we're thinking. We're just in it. The knowing is there, consciousness is there, but we're not mindful.

Then in a certain moment, we wake up from being lost, and we know that we're thinking. Right there, we have a very clear experiential sense of what mindfulness means and the difference between mindfulness and consciousness. I think that's an experience you've all had because it's such a common part of our meditation. That's why we've suggested really highlighting those moments of waking up from being lost, because it reveals the nature of mindfulness to us. It's worth not rushing back to some object, but to really see and understand: this is mindfulness, as opposed to the consciousness that's there when we're lost.

Awareness, as was said this morning, is not the translation of any specific Pali term. This is a word in English, and we use it in many ways. Sometimes, in colloquial English, we could use awareness to mean consciousness. If somebody had been unconscious and then they come out of that, we might say they're aware now, simply meaning they're conscious. We could also mean it in the sense of being mindful—we often use awareness as synonymous. Are you aware of a thought? Are you mindful of a thought? Sometimes it's used that way.

Sometimes awareness is used to include the wisdom aspect, because we can be mindful without wisdom.

Mindfulness is one of the universal wholesome factors, which means that in every wholesome mind state, mindfulness is present. Non-greed and non-hatred are also universal wholesome factors, which is why in every moment of mindfulness, in every moment of a wholesome mind state, we're not clinging to the object, we're not condemning the object—because non-greed and non-hatred always arise together with mindfulness.

Wisdom, however, is not a universal. We can be mindful, in a wholesome mind state, and sometimes wisdom is there, sometimes not. Wisdom is that investigatory quality of mind, and in the Buddhist context specifically, it means understanding the three characteristics. We could have a very wholesome mind state of generosity or compassion—mindfulness is there, these other wholesome states are there—but wisdom may or may not be present.

So sometimes we use awareness to mean simply mindfulness, and sometimes we might use it to mean mindfulness plus wisdom. With that term awareness, it really depends on context.

is important when we're using it to define how we're using it, because it can mean different things.

Someone asked me a question about choiceless awareness—she was trying to do this practice, and it seemed that a lot of things were flipping back and forth very quickly. She could be aware of sensations in her body, and then if she tried to label them or define them a little better, that seemed like a thought rather than a moment of mindfulness. Often words would go by, and she would sort of know that words were running through, along with sounds or feelings, all seemingly simultaneous but probably all very brief and dimensional. When she didn't know what the words were, it was like she was with those sensations. But when she came a few seconds later to identify what the words were and have an opinion about them or put a label on them, it seemed that in that moment she was out of mindfulness, though still trying to use wisdom to get the essence of the experience. Her question was: Is this choiceless awareness? Am I doing this right?

These sessions keep my brain young.

I think the observation that when you're putting a note on a sensation, that actually is not the same moment as feeling the sensation, is correct—but one can be mindful of the noting process. The mindfulness is there of the sensation, and then, "Oh, pressure." In that very moment of noting, it's the note that really becomes the object of mindfulness. The mindfulness can be continuous. It's the same way in terms of being aware of thought without understanding or knowing clearly what the thoughts are saying, and then in following moments trying to recap. You can be mindful of that process of trying to recap.

The mindfulness really is choiceless if you're just tracking in each moment what process of mind is happening. Sometimes it's sensation, sometimes it's the noting, sometimes it's just thought, sometimes it's remembering the thought to know what it's saying. If you're right there with each process, then you are settled back in a choiceless awareness. If you are being mindful of each of those processes in turn, that

sounds fine.

Another person mentioned they were doing a Brahmavihara retreat, eight days into compassion practice. The question was about happiness or joy that could arise out of compassion, both on retreat but more particularly in daily life. In doing the compassion meditation intensively, one drops into a space of more stillness and concentration, but it can have quite a somber feeling tone to it. Is there a space of joy or happiness in compassion?

For those of you who haven't done that practice particularly, compassion is one of the Brahmaviharas, and it's related to metta, to loving-kindness. Metta expresses good will or good wishes for all beings. When we have that feeling of metta towards people who are suffering, it transmutes naturally into compassion, because compassion takes the suffering of beings as its object, as its main focus. When we have metta towards beings who are suffering, the compassion comes quite naturally. It's that feeling of, "How can I help?"

It's helpful to begin to discern the difference between compassion and its near enemy—which in Buddhist jargon is the state that looks like compassion but actually isn't. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. And very often sorrow arises easily when we're in a situation where we're close to suffering. It's very easy to have that feeling of sorrow come up. This is something you will have to explore in yourself, so it's not just about believing Buddhist philosophy.

It's really about seeing in your own experience and discerning the difference in these feelings. In sorrow, there's an aversion to suffering—that flavor of aversion mixed in. In compassion, it's not aversion; it's the wish or the motivation to help. There's an intimate relationship to the suffering, but it's being prompted by a different mind state.

So when you look at the feeling of somberness, you want to see whether that's on the sorrow side, with some aversion, or not. It could be that just in the compassion, in that feeling of "may you be free of suffering," with the sense of the possibility of our alleviating it, the wish to alleviate it—that's really the essence of compassion. It's the wish to alleviate suffering.

When that's there, free of aversion, I don't know if I would express that feeling as joy, but it's an ennobling feeling. It's not a depressive feeling at all. That's why when you look at people who are just embodiments of compassion—for example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who's probably the best known example, supposed to be the manifestation of Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion—there is an incredible lightness of his being, in his face and in his coming very close to the most intense kinds of suffering. And I think it's because of this difference: it's not being flavored by aversion.

So that's what I would look at. And then, if the mind is really centered as you're doing the practice in that wish or desire to alleviate suffering, if you're really connecting with that as the motivating quality, then see what the feeling tone is around that. I think you'll find that it's not in any way depressive; it's really

uplifting. But sometimes discerning the difference between a state and its near enemy—that can take careful looking, because they can be very close.

Question: In your talk about vitakka and vicāra, I thought I was kind of getting a handle on it, and then I have to start over at the vicāra part of it. You were talking about choiceless awareness, and it sounded like a series of arisings, initial applications. When I was thinking about vicāra, it seemed like I sort of understand it when it's a sound—a sustaining sound, following it to the end, or like a car passing, watching that until it's out of sight. There's an ability to sustain, to have an experience of sustaining. But when it comes to thought, that was a whole other thing. Does that require thinking about the thought to sustain the awareness of thought? Sometimes thoughts just disappear when you look at them. But if you don't look at them, they continue. And then there's this other thing where they sort of charge ahead and you're sort of hanging on for dear life. So I'm wondering, what does vicāra look like with thought?

I think your investigation of what these particular factors mean with different experiences is helpful, because we want to put this into practice. To have the list of factors and just being able to say them doesn't mean much. It's about how we experience them in our practice.

So the question is: what does vicāra mean, that sustained application, with respect to thought—or really with respect to any object? Because not only thoughts disappear when we're mindful. Sometimes we're just being mindful of changing objects, and in the moment we see them arise, in the moment we're aware of them, we're seeing their changing nature. The vitakka and vicāra in those moments are happening very close together and quickly. You could call it momentary vitakka and vicāra. It doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be there over a noticeable duration.

With respect to thought, I would give more emphasis to discerning whether the mindfulness factor is present. Are you mindful of the thought? Are you mindful that you're thinking? If the mindfulness is there—that is, you're not lost in the thought—sometimes in the moment of being mindful the thought just disappears because we're not feeding it. Sometimes there's a strong energy behind the thought and it may continue, but from the moment of being mindful, even as it's continuing, we know that it's happening.

A very interesting aspect of mindfulness of thinking, which involves vitakka and vicāra, arises when we consciously or intentionally think about something.

In this context, the only allowance is Dharma reflections. No intentional thinking about anything else. That doesn't mean other thoughts won't come—they'll come plenty. But when we're consciously reflecting on the Dharma, the thoughts will be continuing. There will be a whole train of thought. But because it's our intention to reflect on some Dharma point, we can be mindful of it, of the whole sequence. And there will be vitaka and vicara—the initial connection and then the sustained application.

What is the relationship between mindfulness and vitaka and vicara? Are vitaka and vicara mindful? No,

they're different factors with slightly different functions. Mindfulness, as I mentioned, is a universal wholesome factor, so it's always present in every wholesome state. Vitaka and vicara are called occasional mental factors, and they're neither wholesome nor unwholesome, because we can have initial and sustained application with an unwholesome mind state—where we connect with something and stay with it, motivated by greed or by hatred. So vitaka and vicara are ethically neutral, and they're sometimes there, sometimes not.

One suggestion with regard to vitaka and vicara: don't think too much about it. The beauty of this practice is that we can really simplify it. What we're doing is cultivating mindfulness in each moment of what is arising. We're aware, we know what it is—a thought, a sound, a sensation, an emotion, whatever it is—and the continuity of mindfulness will bring everything we need. All of this is interesting, and a few moments' reflection on it can be valuable, but I wouldn't spend too much time on it.

The next question concerns the Buddhist notion of non-attachment and how this relates to relationships in our lives—for example, how we can love our families without being attached. The very question reveals the answer.

Let's do a little one-minute guided meditation. If you can, just for a moment, think of someone for whom it's natural to have loving feeling. It may be a partner, a child, a parent, a close friend—just somebody in your life you're really close to, someone you really have love for. See if you're able to connect with that feeling of loving them.

And then see if you can conjure up the feeling of being attached to them.

They're really different feelings. Not only are they different, in some way they're completely opposite. At least in my experience, when I feel most loving, it feels like a generosity of the heart. It's a giving of the heart. Attachment is like a holding. The energetic movement of these two states is completely different. One is this opening, and one is this grasping.

For most people, these two have become almost inextricably interwoven. Why? Because I think most people don't take the time to discern the difference. The question itself—"How can we love somebody without being attached?"—reflects our normal way of relating. But I think it's because we haven't really taken the time or developed the discernment experientially to feel the difference.

When we do feel that difference, an interesting question to consider is: Does attachment, that holding, in any way whatsoever enhance the feeling of love? I don't think so. In fact, I think attachment is the source of a lot of problems. Where does fear come from in relationships? Where does jealousy come from? Does it come from that generosity of heart, or does it come from the holding? And where does openness, where does the loving feeling come from? Does it come from attachment?

This is a very interesting arena to explore. And again, this is something each of us has to feel out for ourselves so it's real, not some theoretical thing—to really examine these different states within ourselves.

The follow-up question was essentially: Is it okay to feel that if someone were to go away, you would feel sad? Is that love rather than attachment? Is there a possibility there?

Yes.

But if there's weeping and wailing... though I don't want to put this out as something superficial. This is not a superficial thing. This is a deep exploration.

One of the examples of the depth of it happened at the time of the Buddha's death. People loved him, as one could imagine—this totally extraordinary being and the people who were around him. Many of the disciples who were not yet fully enlightened were lost in the weeping and wailing and grief. And it's said that those who were fully enlightened were not. So this is a deep thing. This is not something superficial. But at whatever level we're looking at it, I think we can understand on that level and ease to some extent the suffering of attachment.

It's so interesting to notice—not only in this arena but just the habit of our minds that have developed over all the years of our lives, and within the Buddhist understanding maybe over many lifetimes—the habit of the mind to be seduced by suffering. So many times I've been in situations where something has come up, whether in relationships or anything else, where the mind gets caught up in the story and I'm really suffering. Then after a while I'll notice it, and the mind will just come to a place of ease and openness and spaciousness, awareness, peace. And then the mind will get caught back in the old story again. I just watch my mind: peace, suffering. Oh, let's suffer. That's basically what the mind is doing. Why? It's out of habit. We've gone that way for so long because we haven't been paying careful attention. A lot of our practice is seeing that and realizing that we may have a choice. We may not have to go to this suffering each time. But as you well know, it's a practice. It's not just like that.

The question is why do we withhold love for ourselves until somehow we feel that we deserve it or the conditions are right. I think you're correct in that it's a habit, and our minds have all been conditioned by so many things in our lives and the circumstances of our lives. We have learned a lot of very unuseful habits, habits that cause suffering.

The beauty of a retreat is that we're in a situation where there aren't many distractions. There's not a lot to do here. You sit and you walk and you eat a couple of times a day and that's it. And so we really get a very clear view of the patterns, of the habits, and it's only through that awareness that gradually—and this is not a quick thing—but through seeing the habit, if we can begin to see the mind going to the old habit of suffering, in that moment of awareness we might say, no, I don't have to do that. I've seen that so often.

It's not only the not doing of what just brings suffering. It's also the doing of what actually is wholesome, which is why the mettā practice is so powerful, especially with respect to what you asked. Irrespective of the conditioning of our lives, we see we can make a choice. We can cultivate just goodwill for ourselves. And the more we do it, the more that becomes the habit.

All of this just reveals the amazing nature of the mind as a phenomenon. As you're going through the day, it's so easy to get caught up in the techniques of what we're doing. Sometimes I think it's helpful just to sit back, almost as if one is holding the question for a little bit: What is this mind? Here's this phenomenon, and it has all of these amazingly powerful energies at work. Some are wholesome, some are unwholesome. Just to have a sense of amazement about it all.

For me, one of the aspects of taking refuge is just that incredible sense of appreciation of the Buddha's mind that could sort it all out. He just gave us a map. Even just in terms of mapping—these are wholesome mind states, these are unwholesome mind states—just that. If we had to figure that out for ourselves... I mean, it's hard enough just connecting with three breaths in a row. And so there's this amazing appreciation that the map is there, which helps us to understand our minds.

And this relationship between concentration and fabrication—it's like the mind becomes concentrated, and its potential to fabricate really fascinating, amazing, interesting, and fabricated insights seems so seductive and so prone to taking you into really far out, totally useless places.

The question, or really the comment, was about how when the mind gets more concentrated, it both has the potential for deepening insight and the potential to fabricate a lot of concepts and ideas about these mind states—even doubting the insights that come through deepening concentration and whether those insights are fabricated.

I think this is a good reminder of what the essence of the practice is about. It's not about any state, no matter what it is, fabricated or unfabricated—it's about not clinging. This is so hard to remember. We talk about all these wholesome states and the different kinds of insights, and sometimes they are fabricated. We've heard about them and we kind of think that we're seeing it, and maybe we are and maybe we're not. But the bottom line, the purpose of it all, is to decondition the grasping in the mind. Why? Because when we're holding on, when we're grasping, that's the source of suffering. And when we're not, that's a place of the end of suffering, a place of peace.

One way of strengthening this attitude of not clinging to states, or even to insights, is using intermittently—or as often as is useful—just the mental note of whatever you're feeling. Concentration, equanimity—that becomes just another state to be mindful of. Equanimity, equanimity, peace, whatever. So that we're not seduced into either fabricating anything about it or getting attached to the state, because the freedom is in the mind that is not holding on. Not holding on to anything.

In one of the famous Mahayana sutras, the Diamond Sutra, the pith instruction is "develop a mind that clings to nought." Well, we don't want to cling even to nought. So perhaps it's better expressed as "develop a mind that doesn't cling to anything." It's that letting go.

So then you can see whether the insights that are there are in the service of not clinging or not. If they're not in the service of not clinging, then it may be a fabrication. What's the purpose of really seeing the

changing nature of things, or the unsatisfying nature, or the selfless nature? The whole purpose of it is to decondition grasping. That's the purpose.

It's so easy for all of us—we've all experienced so often the seduction of meditative states, because it can get very pleasant at times, very peaceful, very insightful. I had one experience with Sayadaw U Pandita. I'd been there for a few months, and my practice was really in what I felt to be a deep place of concentration, of insight. The mind was observing just the most minute aspects of experience, and I was completely fascinated by what I was seeing. I went in and was reporting this to Sayadaw, really happy with my practice. And all he said to me was, "You're too attached to subtlety."

It was a great interview because I thought it was good practice. And he just reframed the whole thing. I was fascinated with that level of perception, but I didn't see the attachment.

Someone asked about faith—in terms of people awakening. Here we are in 2012 in the U.S., and sometimes I've heard that the Dharma will really take root when there are liberated people here. The question was about my sense of where we're going, what the direction is, given my exposure to teachers here and in the West.

I think, in looking back, I see two movements in the transmission of the Dharma to the West, and it's really an extraordinary time. In the history of the Buddhist teachings, a movement of the teachings from one culture to another is a huge thing. When Buddhism first went from India to China, and then to Southeast Asia, to Japan—this was something that happened over centuries. How slowly the transmission of those teachings changed those cultures, had a profound impact on them. And in the process, many great masters emerged in each of those traditions.

So we're at the very beginning of something that I think is tremendously significant. We're just in very early stages of it, but when you take that broader view, it's quite inspiring.

One of the things that's happening, I think, is the broad dissemination of the teachings. When I think back to when we first started IMS, when we first started teaching almost forty years ago—nobody had even heard of mindfulness. It was just so unknown, and meditation was just a weird thing to do. Forty years, which is a very short time, and we could almost say mindfulness is mainstream now. It's amazing how it has disseminated, and it's continuing to do so.

So that's a big movement. Out of that widespread dissemination, people practice with varying levels of interest, commitment, and time. We all come to it with different levels of motivation.

Everyone here—don't undervalue the power of the commitment you made to be here. It's not ordinary. It's out of people doing practice like this, and even longer, that real depth of understanding and awakening happens. And you see it. You see there are examples of people who have really gone very deep in the practice. But when you look at some of the great Asian masters—we were just talking today among ourselves—some of them practiced retreat in a cave for twenty years. So what's possible, the level of

what's possible... I don't know what the right image is. It's like we're growing into it. We're growing into the possibilities.

Someone asked whether there's a danger, with mindfulness becoming so mainstream and more of a tool for wellness, that the liberation aspect might get lost.

I'm not worried about that—not if you keep practicing. The more it's disseminated, people will benefit on whatever level they're practicing, and it helps to alleviate suffering. So all of that is good. As long as there are people who both study and practice, who appreciate the fullness of what's possible—the real possibility of liberation and awakening—as long as that's out there, then people who are inspired by that will go the distance. We each find our own level of interest and motivation. I think it's just important that there are always people who are really committed to the depth of practice so that it is not lost. But the fact that it's spread widely where that may not be the main motivation—it's fine.

Another question arose about the connection between culture and practice. As the story goes, when we brought this tradition back from Asia, we separated out the cultural aspects from the practice aspects. The question was really about whether some cultural aspects from Asia were left behind in the transmission, and also what have been the cultural influences from the West on the teachings.

It's really interesting to me because I've heard and read a lot—and in some way it's been a criticism—that as Buddhism came to the West, we separated out the meditation and left the rich cultural aspects of the teachings found in Asia behind. But it's really interesting because in practicing with Asian teachers in Asia, it was just this. It was just this practice of sitting and watching the mind. Whether studying with Munindraji in India or going to the meditation monasteries in Asia—it's true that in the society there are a lot of other cultural manifestations, but in the practice of the teachings for liberation, for awakening, this is it. This is what we were taught in Asia. So it's not that we left something behind; we're bringing exactly what we learned there. And when we read the suttas, the Buddhist discourses, this is what the Buddha taught.

One of the interesting cultural impacts from the West—and this is an ongoing dialogue and experiment—is understanding the interface of Western psychology with meditation. I see them as two overlapping circles where there's quite a lot of overlap and also some differences. I think we've learned a lot from Western psychology, especially skillful tools for being with the mind and particularly difficult aspects of suffering. The danger or the caution in that is when we lose sight of the potential for liberation, which is really not part of Western psychology. That's not what it does. It is possible to get seduced, in a way, by the real relief from suffering that many psychological tools can offer and limit ourselves, limit our aspirations. So I see this dialogue continuing—to what degree is Western psychology helpful and useful, and is there a time when it becomes a limitation?

Actually, there's one other big impact, and this goes more to the cultural manifestation.

And we might call it the feminization of the Dharma in the West. In most Asian contexts, Buddhism has been pretty patriarchal. You see it in those cultures, in the difference between how the monks are treated and how the nuns are treated. It's there. And I think in the West, we're really transforming that, as you can see. Which is a great thing. It's really a great thing.

Question from participant about working with generosity and noticing lack of generosity in the mind

This is a great question. The question is about working with generosity—she's seeing in her mind a lack of generosity at times, a kind of holding on, and questioning what really belongs to us and what doesn't, and how to work with it.

Carol is giving a whole talk on generosity on Friday, so she will answer every aspect of this. But it's a totally important practice. In some way, generosity is the manifestation of not clinging, of not holding on. So it's a beautiful practice, and it's worthy of not only one talk but many talks, because it's really an important quality.

Let's just sit for a couple of moments.

May the merit of our practice be shared by all beings everywhere.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.