Working With Fear

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:00:44

We can understand our Dharma practice as a path of opening. It is opening to our bodies, where we go from a sense of the solidity of the body to awareness of particular sensations, to the feeling of the body as a fluid energy field. We can understand our practice as an opening of our sense doors, a refinement of our perceptions. And you've probably noticed over these weeks we've become more aware of nuances of sight and sound and smell and taste. Our perceptions are getting more refined. We uncover a depth and a range of different emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant—feelings of love, of gratitude, of joy, of anger, of restlessness, of peace. We begin exploring in a deeper and more intimate way the range of our emotions. There's an opening of our minds through the release of memories and images. It's a common experience in practice, one I've had and I'm sure you've had also, where we can be sitting and memories come of things we haven't thought of in maybe twenty years, and all of a sudden it pops into the mind. So there's a real opening on that level also. There's an opening to silence and different levels of silence. Munindraji, my first teacher, once gave a three-hour talk on twenty-one kinds of silence. By the end of it, I was ready for some silence.

Our practice is not a reaching out for these experiences, but rather a settling back into the natural unfolding of this whole process, into the simple knowing of what's arising. As we do this, we understand with increasing clarity the essential emptiness and insubstantial nature of all arising phenomena. A phrase which encapsulates this, which Munindraji used often: it's just empty phenomena rolling on. Whatever it is in the body, in the mind, in the emotions and thoughts—it's just empty phenomena rolling on.

But in this process there's one very strongly conditioned tendency of mind, one that we very often identify with, that causes us to freeze this experience of the unfolding process. We freeze our experience in this flow of change. It's kind of like a deer being frozen in the headlights. The tendency, the conditioned tendency in mind that has this effect is the rather strongly conditioned mind state and emotion of fear.

So tonight I'd like to talk about fear—both how it is conditioned in the mind and how we can transform the experience of it into freedom.

As we're journeying on this path of opening, as I'm sure you've noticed, we come to some edges or boundaries. Everything within that frame we're comfortable with; we can accept it, we can be with it, it's familiar. But then we get to the edge or the boundary, whatever it may be. And it's at these edges that fears, whether large ones or small ones, begin to emerge. We begin to experience fear when we're at the edge of our comfort zone. It might be fear of pain. It might be fear of experiencing different emotions,

different psychological states. It might be fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of death.

The problem is that all of these experiences, all of these edges, are actually part of life itself. They're part of our experience. So the fears that are arising are fears of what is true in our experience in those moments. And it's for this reason we need to learn how to work with fear, so that instead of contracting back into our comfort zone, we can actually relax at the boundary, relax at the edge, and open further. First we need to recognize what it is that we're afraid of, what limits us, and then to explore the possibilities of going beyond those limits.

When I imagine the mind of the Buddha—and at this point it is just an imagination—but when I think of it, I see that on our own path, we come to an edge, come to an edge, come to an edge. Imagine the mind of a Buddha without edges, without any boundaries at all. A mind without boundaries is a mind without fear. It's an inspiring way of holding what we're doing in the practice. We're coming to that place of freedom.

So first we need to look at what it is we're afraid of, and then to look at the nature of fear itself. What is its nature as a mind state, and how can we work with it?

What are some of the things that limit us? One of the most obvious, and one which we work with a lot, is the fear of physical pain or even physical discomfort. We are so conditioned to want to avoid unpleasant experience. This goes so deep. There's a natural inclination to go for the pleasant and to avoid the unpleasant. We can notice this in so many ways during the day—just noticing the small shifts of posture to ease some discomfort. There's a Dharma saying that movement masks dukkha. Our movement masks the truth of dukkha because we don't want to experience the discomfort of the pain, so we move to alleviate it. Throughout the day, just in the course of our daily activities, it would be interesting to see what motivates us as we engage in these activities.

Why not sit with the resolution that the Bodhisattva made under the Bodhi tree? "I'm not going to get up until I have attained full enlightenment." Imagine coming in here and thinking, "Okay, this is it." But what happens at a certain point? It just gets too uncomfortable, too painful. Okay, well that's fine—we can be mindful in any posture. So then we get up and walk, relieving that discomfort. Well, why not just walk? Go on walking until we're fully enlightened. At a certain point we get tired, so then we have to either sit or lie down. Why do we eat? To alleviate the discomfort of hunger. Why do we bathe? So much of what we do is a move to alleviate some kind of dukkha. This is what's motivating us throughout the day. It's not that these things are unwise to do, but we should see actually what's happening.

At some point I just got so fed up with this. I was in India in those years, practicing up in the mountains. I got this quite thick foam mattress and decided I was going to just lie down on my back—nothing crossed, body fully supported. "Okay, this is it. I'm going to get enlightened in this position. No discomfort, no dukkha, just supported on a bit of foam." Well, it didn't take that long before even in this position, just by not moving, the body started to hurt—the pressure and all the familiar sensations. I don't remember now how long I lay there; it wasn't all day. So we keep on moving to avoid the discomfort that's inherent. If we

have a body, this is what's going to happen.

It's interesting to notice our fear of discomfort. When it arises, what's the response in the mind? We can often recognize that the fear is there in a sense of contraction—contraction in the body, where we tense a little bit in the face of it, and contraction in the mind. We don't want to be with it. So we often get into this place of enduring the discomfort or pain rather than opening to it. That's largely the function of fear.

This fear of anticipated pain is particularly revealing. We may be feeling some discomfort in the moment, but it's workable, it's okay. Yet our mind starts imagining, "Oh, it's okay now, but it's getting pretty bad." We start thinking, "What is this going to be like in half an hour? Or an hour? Or two hours?" We build up in our minds what the pain is going to become and then become afraid of that, and we take various actions. In the moment it's okay, but in our imagination it's not, and we're afraid of it.

I had a very striking experience of this. It goes back a lot of years to my time in India. In the summertime, the plains in Bodh Gaya get very hot—like 120 degrees. So most of us, when we could, went up to the mountains. One year some friends and I went up to Kashmir, which was then quite accessible. But to get from the plains up to the high mountains required a seventeen-hour Indian bus ride. For those of you who have been there, you know Indian buses—they're crowded, really crowded, and bumpy. The seat I had was a middle seat over the crankcase, with the engine fumes coming up. I got on this bus facing seventeen hours of this ride. I just couldn't imagine it. So I said, "Okay, I'm going to be with my breath. I'm just going to stay on my breath and keep all of this out." That was my strategy.

Well, it worked okay for an hour, an hour and a half, or two hours, but it was exhausting to keep my mind clenched in that way. At a certain point, there was actually a little mini satori where I realized this is the wrong strategy.

So I just relaxed. Instead of trying to keep all the discomfort out, what if I let it in? I relaxed that holding of the mind, just opened up, settled back, and it was very unpleasant—the fumes and the discomfort and all of it. But the ease of allowing it in made the unpleasantness fine. It really wasn't a problem. It was just what it was.

It was so interesting to me that it was the fear of anticipated pain or anticipated discomfort which had imprisoned me. As soon as I could let go and just relax into what was happening in the moment, even though it was unpleasant, it was totally fine.

We can also see how fear of discomfort or pain feeds our desires. This is really interesting. Again, this goes back to an early retreat. I was actually sitting with Mahasi Sayadaw in England, and every morning we'd come down for breakfast and it was the same breakfast every morning.

The first morning I came down and there was porridge, then two pieces of toast, some fruit, and tea. But when I was eating and finished, one piece of toast was enough. Second morning, same exact breakfast, go through the line, took my porridge, two pieces of toast, fruit, and tea. One piece of toast was enough. Third

day, I come down, same breakfast, took my porridge, two pieces of toast.

I don't know how many days it took me—five days, six days—before I finally noticed: Joseph, you're not eating that second piece of toast. You don't want it. I noticed in my mind, just going through this line—and it's such a simple activity, just getting our breakfast—how the fear of possibly being hungry was feeding this just-in-case mind. I'll take the second piece of toast just in case I'm hungry. I could have just gotten up and gotten the second piece of toast after. But the fear was operative, even on this somewhat trivial level. It was interesting to see how it operates, how often our anticipated fear is just feeding our desire system.

So be watchful for the just-in-case mind, whether it's with food or anything else.

Working with physical pain and discomfort, as you know from practicing now for so many weeks, can be such a powerful part of our practice. Our minds don't wander very much when there's obvious pain or discomfort in the body—it's a very good object of concentration. And it brings us right to the edge of what we're comfortable with, what we can be with. That's where we want to be. When we're at that edge, can we recognize that? Can I settle? Relax? Can I open to this? Is this okay? It's in this way that our mind expands, our capacity to be with experience expands.

As we practice opening to these uncomfortable or painful sensations, we can have a very direct, intimate experience of their selfless, changing nature. We see so clearly that these sensations we're feeling are not subject to our will. Can you come in and sit down and simply decide: no pain? No. All these sensations are arising according to their own causes and conditions. When those causes are there, the particular sensations arise. Conditions change, sensations change.

This is one of the meanings of anatta, of selflessness. It means the ungovernableness of phenomena. Things are following their own laws. We see this very directly, very clearly, and it's a deepening of our understanding of selflessness.

Practicing opening to these unpleasant aspects of physical sensation is also a tremendous preparation for being ill and dying. In these situations, it might not be a question of simply shifting position and the discomfort going away. We may very well be in a situation, either when we're very sick or in the dying process, where discomfort at the least, and maybe strong pain, is simply part of the process. How will we be with that? Will the mind have its conditioned reaction of fear and contraction? Or, through our practice now,

Through our training now, can we learn, at least to some extent, to relax behind it? It's okay. We can feel it and not be so caught up or identified with the fear. It will be a tremendous help for us.

Now in the discourses, the suttas, the Buddha often would be speaking with people who were either very ill or who were dying. And there's one phrase which he would often use in these conversations. He would say, "Even though there is affliction in the body, can the mind remain unafflicted?"

So that's something we should even consider as a possibility, because I think most people—the classic Buddhist term is "unenlightened worldlings"—just most people in the world, if the body is afflicted, assume the mind will be afflicted. But to see that that's not necessarily the case. We can be with this affliction of the body and the mind remain totally at peace.

There's one story of this. I may have read this in part one. It's one of my favorite examples of this possibility. It's so inspiring to me. It describes the dying days of Henry David Thoreau, the great American naturalist and writer. He died very young—he died at forty-four of tuberculosis, a very painful disease. Someone who knew him then, writing of Thoreau's life and these dying days, said, "Henry was never affected, never reached by his illness. Very often I heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever." And this is somebody dying of tuberculosis. He enjoyed existence as well as ever. He remarked, "There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body."

I find that remarkable—that insight and that understanding that the nature of awareness can hold anything. The mind conforms, awareness conforms to the condition of the body. There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health. So can we even consider that possibility and begin to train in it? We can do it right here on retreat, even with less intense unpleasant sensation. But we hold that possibility.

As you know, with all of this, we need to start small. Maybe just for short periods of time as painful sensations come. Maybe not starting with the most painful, but we slowly expand our ability. This is the training of opening. And we begin to decondition the response of fear, which contracts us and pulls us back.

It is helpful in practicing this to learn to recognize different kinds of pain, because different kinds of pain will require or suggest different responses. Sometimes pain is a danger signal. If you have your hand in fire—oh, burning, burning, burning—"The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences." That's not wisdom. So we need to recognize when pain is a danger signal, when it's telling us something.

For example, if you're sitting and there's pain in your knee and you get up and it goes away, that's fine, no matter how intense it is. But if over the course of a day or over the course of several days you're sitting and it's just getting stronger and stronger and more intense, that may be saying something. That may be saying, okay, we're straining this too much. We need to sit in a different posture or change posture. So we want to be intelligent about this.

But often in our practice, the discomfort we feel is simply the opening to the accumulated tensions of our lives. Mostly we live in such a distracted way that we're not feeling what we're carrying around. We come to a retreat where there's not a lot of distraction, we settle in, and we feel the tension that we've been holding maybe for years. And one of the things that we see happening is that simply through the process of awareness, when we can be with these discomforts without fear, with openness, there's actually an

unwinding. We're unwinding a lot of the tensions that have been accumulated.

You may not have noticed this yet, but a very common experience on retreats, especially in long retreats like this—it's the best de-wrinkling cream. I see it in my observation of others and I see it in myself when I'm on retreat. It's like the face just softens so much, and the tension that we hold in it becomes so noticeable. And that's just indicative of even the deeper tensions that we hold in the body.

The caution here is that it's very easy, as we begin to hold the feeling of discomfort in this useful frame of "this is an unwinding," for that understanding to become problematic. Holding it in that way really helps us relax behind it and allow it to happen, but we don't want to make that the aim of the practice, because then it just becomes greed. Watch for that "in order to" in the mind—"I'm with this *in order for* it to open." This is subtle, but it's a very seductive trap. We can understand that there is this unwinding and still just be settled back, letting it happen, rather than practicing in order for it to happen. This is something to watch for in the practice.

How we relate to physical pain really can show us how we relate to other unpleasant experiences in our lives. Do we contract? Do we pull back? Are we afraid of the unpleasantness? Or are we learning to open to it, to be with it? It's okay to feel it.

Fears might also arise in relation to certain memories or images arising in the mind. There might be specific events in the past that come up and we pull back from—they're really unpleasant. Sometimes there are archetypal images in the mind, like certain archetypal images of anger or hatred or intense emotions that are not even specific memories. These can be very frightening images sometimes, and we pull back.

But can we practice—whether with specific memories or these more archetypal images—can we practice seeing them for what they are? They're empty images in the moment. They have no power in themselves other than the power of our associations. But sometimes these associations run very deep, and there can be powerful emotions connected with these images or memories that arise. So we need to proceed slowly, especially when there are powerful associations. Opening to them gradually, slowly. If it feels overwhelming, just stay with it for a few minutes. Say, "Okay, can I be with this?" And then pull back, go to something more neutral—to sound, to the whole body. But if we can slowly learn to be with this material, it's tremendously healing.

When we first started teaching in this country—this goes back to the seventies and the Vietnam War was still going on—one friend of ours in California, where we were teaching up in the Redwoods, had been a medic in Vietnam and had experienced horrendous things in the war. When he came back, he said he was having nightmares every night, reliving in his dreams the horrors he had been through. He came to a two-week retreat. All of these images started coming up for him and were very present, very immediate. He had a pretty balanced mind and was able, gradually, to learn just to be with the images as they came. So they would come—and you can imagine the power and all the emotions associated with them—and he

just was with them. He could open to them in a gradual way.

It was amazing. He said that after the two weeks, and then we saw him back in Berkeley, all the nightmares were gone. He had processed all of that with awareness, with mindfulness. That was a relatively short time to do it in. Sometimes the process is much longer. But it shows the healing power of awareness. If we can learn to do that in a way that's right for us, at our own speed, then it allows us to go beyond the fear of these images and these emotions. We just open to them and they actually purify—our minds get purified of them.

We sometimes have fear of feeling certain emotions even when they're not traumatic. They may just be part of the shadow side of our personality, of our minds. Feelings like unworthiness, or shame, or guilt, or failure, or even feelings of embarrassment—just these feelings that are unpleasant, that we don't like to look at. And so when they come, we just back off. We're afraid of feeling them.

Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychologist, had very apt words about this. He said, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular."

It's not popular. People generally don't like to open to these unpleasant, painful mind states—the ordinary, the mundane ones, not the traumatic ones, just the ordinary stuff of our lives. And so out of fear of opening, of feeling them, we block them off, but then we're fragmenting our lives. We're cutting ourselves off from what's a part of this whole process.

How much do we do as individuals and as a culture to avoid feeling lonely or sad or bored? Do you think ninety percent of our culture is about not feeling bored? It would be so much easier and less expensive to just be okay with that feeling, because they're all just feelings that come and go. We're afraid of feeling them because they're unpleasant, and so it drives us to all kinds of actions.

How much of our attachment and clinging comes from our fear of feeling loss, which is inevitable? And yet our fear of it drives us to cling and to be attached. How averse are we to taking risks because of a fear of failure? It's an unpleasant feeling. Nobody likes to feel failure. But it's also okay. It's just another passing feeling. And if we're afraid of that feeling, it keeps us from taking risks, various kinds in our lives.

All of this doesn't mean that our meditation is not progressing if we're not diving into all these unpleasant emotions. It's not that we have to be looking for some great emotional catharsis, but rather it's learning to see when we're at the edge, in terms of emotions, of our comfort zone, and seeing if we can relax and open to these feelings when they do arise.

So there's fear of pain, fear of certain memories and images that might come, and emotions associated with them, fear of more mundane unpleasant emotions—just the shadow side of our experience, the parts we don't like to look at. There are also deeply conditioned fears of impermanence, of change, of loss, and fear of death. Because of these fears we hold on, we cling to different aspects of this mind-body process.

We create this sense, we create this concept of self in an effort to create some permanence, some stability. And so we don't recognize the moment-to-moment arising and dissolution of all experience—that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Just that simple statement in the discourses. Sometimes the Buddha or other great teachers would just say that sentence and people would get enlightened. So I'll say it again: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Just think of the implications of that. Because what has the nature to arise? Absolutely everything in our experience. Everything in our experience has the nature to arise. It will also pass away. That is its nature. Can we open to that?

A lot of our practice is precisely about opening to the experience of this flow of change, to the momentariness of things, so we decondition the grasping and the clinging and the attachment. It's something to simply be aware of. As we're beginning to open to that, do we experience fear? Do we pull back? Are we trying to fix something? Or do we allow for the flow? Do we surrender into it?

Not opening deeply to the truth of change is often felt and experienced as the fear of death. This is common. Many people, when they think about dying, it calls up some deep fears. And in many circles, talking of death—I mean, can you imagine going out to dinner with your family after the retreat and saying, "Okay, folks, let's talk about your dying"? It would be a pretty awakened family. Usually people shy away from acknowledging this or talking about this.

And yet the Buddha suggested that we reflect on this daily, because it's such an obvious truth, such an obvious manifestation of change. It's not a mistake, and it's certainly not personal. One of the most striking statements contained within the law of dependent origination—when the Buddha was describing his own process, he was kind of working backwards. He saw that all beings would die, and he asked, "Well, what's the cause of death?" And then he worked back: the cause of death is birth.

And it's so obvious, but so overlooked. It's like we don't quite get that oh yes, if we're born, we're also going to die. And that this is just nature. It's not morbid, and it's not a problem, really—if we truly understand the process and the naturalness of this process.

But because fear can come up as we begin to see the truth of change, the truth that everything that arises will pass and whatever is born will die—if we get locked into the fear, then we pull back, we contract, we don't see it. And so we close off to the possibility of living in a free way.

This is again from Thoreau's death. During his long illness, I never heard a murmur escape him or the slightest wish expressed to remain with us. His perfect contentment was truly wonderful. None of his friends seemed to realize how very ill he was, so full of life and good cheer did he seem. One friend, as if by way of consolation, said to him, "Well, Mr. Thoreau, we must all go." Henry replied, "When I was a little boy, I learned that I must die"—which is quite extraordinary in itself—"so of course I am not disappointed

now. Death is as near to you as it is to me."

Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves. When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, aunt." Quite an amazing understanding.

So we can come to that same place of understanding if we recognize the fear that may arise and then learn to work with it. When we work with the fear, we can settle back into the truth, the very obvious truth of change.

Sometimes our fear is of things not changing. We might become aware of certain unwholesome patterns or habits in ourselves, certain unwholesome behaviors or personality attributes, and we think they will always be there. "I'm just like this." The whole universe changes, but not this. And how often do we get caught up in that kind of attachment and delusion?

So we've talked of things that often condition fear to arise. It can be painful sensations in the body. It can be painful memories or emotions—either strongly traumatic ones or just more ordinary ones, but ones that are unpleasant. Fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of death.

So the question then is: fears are going to arise at the edges of what's comfortable for us. This is the practice, and we want to be at those edges. This is not a problem. This is precisely where we want to be, because that's where we can open and that's where we can learn to understand fear. We can look at the nature of fear itself.

The first step is to become aware of it. We want to become aware of the fear as it arises. But here it's important to distinguish some different components of what awareness means.

One component is recognition. We want to recognize, "Oh, fear is here." But recognition is not mindfulness. Recognition is actually the factor of perception. We recognize the emotion of fear, but we could be recognizing it with resistance. We could be recognizing it and not liking it. We could be recognizing it and pushing it away. So we know it's there, but we're not necessarily being mindful of it.

Mindfulness is another component of this awareness. Mindfulness means we're recognizing it and we're coming to a place of acceptance of it. It's unpleasant—fear is not a pleasant emotion. It's analogous to a painful sensation in the body. But just as with pain, we can learn to be with the unpleasantness of it. It's okay.

An image which might help guide the mind to this place of acceptance of the fear itself: imagine being with a frightened child. How would you be? You would probably be present. You would probably be caring.

You know, not feeding the fear, not telling the child, "Yeah, you really should be afraid." And if there's some wisdom, you also wouldn't be denying it—"Oh, you're not really feeling it"—which sometimes

happens. You wouldn't be making demands on it, not condemning it. There would just be a loving acceptance, being with the child in a loving way, helping them to hold it. "It's okay, it's okay to feel this."

What's so interesting is that it's not hard to imagine us being that way with a child who is frightened. I think we can all imagine responding in that way. But for some reason, we have a very hard time responding to the fear when it arises in ourselves. Yet it's exactly the same attitude that's needed. So it's worth examining. As the fear arises and we recognize it, can we drop into that place of real mindful acceptance, that loving acceptance? "Okay, it's okay to feel this."

This is essential. But it's also interesting to note that we can be mindful and accepting without wisdom. So wisdom is the third component. Wisdom is the understanding that comes out of mindfulness, out of acceptance. It is the understanding that this fear, this emotion, this mind state is also impermanent, is also not self. In wisdom, we no longer identify with it.

These three aspects can be brought to bear when we're at the edges of what's comfortable and we see fear arising. We can recognize it, we can become mindful and accepting—really accepting that it's okay to feel it—and then understand it with wisdom. This becomes a powerful way of deconditioning the power of fear.

One way of working with these three aspects—recognition, loving acceptance, and wisdom—is to unpack the experience, because fear is not just one thing. We experience fear as particular sensations in the body. We experience it as thoughts in the mind, a certain feeling tone in the mind. Simply investigating each of its components helps us relate to it in a more skillful way.

When we experience and investigate the nature of fear itself, we begin to understand that it is another conditioned arising, an appearance in the mind. It's like a big cloud formation in the sky. Maybe the cloud is dark and threatening with all these manifestations, but it's still just an arising in the sky—conditions coming together, conditions changing, the cloud disappearing. Can we understand fear and all the other emotions arising in just the same way? It's just a mind state. That's all it is.

But what happens—very often with fear—is that we build a whole superstructure of self on top of this emotion, this arising appearance that arose due to conditions. We construct this skyscraper of self, identifying with the fear: "I'm afraid, this is my fear, I'm a fearful person." We're just solidifying the whole thing.

I've worked with fear a lot in my practice. It was my primary difficult emotion. There were times when it was so intense and primal that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It was completely irrational, but that fearful energy was just so strong. Working with it for a long time, I started creating this whole self-image of being a fearful person: "This is going to take thirty years of therapy to unwind." Just going on and on, feeling more and more contracted in it.

One time I was teaching with Sharon Salzberg in Texas, and we were going for a walk after lunch. I was

going on and on about my fear. She just turned to me and said, "Joseph, it's just a mind state." Something I had said to people a thousand times. But sometimes when you hear it at just the right moment... it was amazing, because in that instant—"It's just a mind state, that's all it is"—something shifted.

So we want to keep working with understanding the nature of fear, seeing how we identify with and solidify it, and then coming back when we can to see its empty, insubstantial nature.

The Dalai Lama had some very pragmatic advice. Somebody asked him, "How can we work with deep fears?" This is what he said: "If you have some fear of pain or suffering, you should examine whether there is anything you can do about it. If you can, there is no need to worry about it. If you cannot do anything, then there is also no need to worry."

Sometimes we shy away from our fears because of the feeling of vulnerability at those times. It's a very delicate time. But these moments when we're most open, most vulnerable, can also be the times of deepest connection to other people, to what's going on. I had a very powerful experience of this, going back to the seventies when we first started IMS.

At that time, some of us started sitting a couple of sesshins with Sasaki Roshi, who, like Sayadaw U Pandita, was a very fierce Zen master. The whole sesshin, as you might know in Zen, is set up just to heighten the pressure. He uses the koan method, so you've got these koans and you have to go see him four times a day. It's just building, building, building.

So I'm sitting this sesshin. I really didn't have any experience of Zen practice. I'd go in, do my bows, and give him the answer to my koan. Mostly he would just say, "Oh, very stupid." It was one variation or another of that for most of the week.

By the fifth day or so, I think he felt a little sorry for me, so he gave me an easier koan. He kind of backed me up—remedial Zen practice. The koan he gave me was: How do you manifest Buddha while chanting a sutra?

That seemed fairly obvious—just go in and chant a little bit of a sutra, since we were doing chanting every day together in the hall. But little did he know, I don't think he knew, that this triggered a deep, deep reaction in me going back to my third grade music teacher who said, "Joseph, just mouth the words." There was this deep-seated inhibition.

In that charged situation, where already there was just a lot of tension and pressure, I'm sitting in the hall just rehearsing these two lines of chant that I was going to do and manifest my Buddha nature. The bell rings. A lot of fear was coming up. I blast in, I do my bows, I start chanting—and I just totally screwed up. I got the chant all wrong, the melody was all wrong. I felt completely exposed, completely raw and naked. It was a terrible feeling of vulnerability.

He just looked at me and said, "Oh, very good."

It was amazing. It was an amazing moment. I can still feel an emotional response now, thirty years later. Because I was so open and so vulnerable, just that expression of mettā touched my heart so deeply—in a way that it would never have been touched if I weren't in that space.

So there's a great value, even though it's unpleasant and hard and difficult. We also want to appreciate the power of what's possible in that vulnerability. We can really see so many things and feel so many things and be connected in such deep ways in those moments.

When we come to these edges, to these boundaries, it's a place of practice. And it has such tremendous potential for us in our understanding.

I'd like to close with a poem by Galway Kinnell, a wonderful poet. The poem is called "Saint Francis and the Sow." This is just one stanza of it:

The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers from within, of self-blessing. Though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness...

Just that line: *Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.*

We need to reteach ourselves.

To put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch it is lovely, until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing.

And so this is our practice. As we work with fear—learning to see what it is we're afraid of, to play at the edge, to open in that place of vulnerability, to see into the nature of fear itself, and to be okay with feeling it—we're retelling ourselves, we're reteaching ourselves loveliness, until it flowers from within, of self-blessing.

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