Liberation through Non-Clinging

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:02:11

As most of you know, the word or term Buddha means "awakened one," and for many of us this actually is the goal of our practice—to awaken from the sleep or the dream of ignorance, of delusion.

We each get a glimpse of this every morning when we wake up, either from a deep sleep or a dream state. Near that moment of awakening, we feel somewhat more connected, somewhat more in the real world. But the Buddha pointed out that even in this relatively awakened state, we're actually still asleep—caught up in the habit patterns of our minds, the habit patterns of thoughts, of emotions.

I'm sure you've noticed over these past days of the retreat how much of the time we're lost in these trains of association, of thoughts, of memories, of plans, of images. What's so interesting is that we hop on these trains, we don't know that we've hopped on, and we actually have no idea where the train is going. Sometime down the track, it's like we awaken again from being lost. We hop off the train and are again attentive, again aware.

So the question for us in our practice and in our lives really is how we can truly wake up. Not just waking up from our nighttime sleep, but waking up from our daytime sleep. What is it that actually will free the mind and the heart?

All the various Buddhist traditions actually agree or converge in one understanding of what frees the mind. There are lots of different techniques and lots of different methods and even lots of different metaphysical, philosophical explanations of things. But all the traditions converge in one understanding of the nature of freedom.

In the Pali texts, which are the texts of this tradition, the Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata"—and that's the word he used to refer to himself, the Tathagata—"namely, liberation through non-clinging." And someplace else he said, "This is the deathless, namely liberation through non-clinging."

These same truths of liberation are expressed also in the Mahayana and the Tibetan traditions. There was a great Indian adept and sage, Tilopa, who in teaching his disciple Naropa said, "You are not fettered, you are not bound by appearances. You are fettered, you are bound by attachments, so cut your attachments." It's the same message.

What's been very important in my own practice, and I think for all of us to realize, is that non-clinging shouldn't be thought of as some far-off state. We'll practice ten years or twenty years or fifty years and maybe someday I'll experience non-clinging? The great realization is that this is our practice now. What

we're practicing in the moment is non-clinging. All the teachings of concentration, of mindfulness, of the precepts, of metta, of the brahmaviharas—all of the teachings really are in the service of this quality of freedom, of non-clinging.

As you've noticed, our unfolding experience is continually changing—different sensations, sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant. The practice of liberation is the same. What's very hard to remember, even after many years of practice, is that we're not practicing for some other better experience. What we're practicing is the mind that is not clinging now.

But we get seduced even in the path of our meditation. How often are we sitting or walking, practicing in order for some other better, more wonderful state to arise? And we forget what the essence, what the very heart of freedom is. Freedom is in the non-grasping mind.

There's a little saying that I made up. It's not in very good English, but it conveys something: "It doesn't matter to what you don't cling." It's so interesting. How often are we practicing for some experience in the future that we won't cling to? Why not not cling now to whatever it is that's arising?

So how do we do this? The message is clear, very unambiguous. The Buddha just put it out in a very straightforward way. The question is how do we accomplish this? How do we practice this non-clinging now?

One way, and this is a very great doorway into not clinging, is through refining our awareness and our perception of impermanence, of change. Someone once asked Suzuki Roshi, who was a great Japanese Zen master who started the San Francisco Zen Center—years ago the collection of his teachings was in a book called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which back in the sixties or seventies was really a Buddhist bestseller, because it just encapsulated so much of his wisdom.

So there's a story that someone once asked him, a student who said, "I've been listening to your talks for years, but I just don't understand. Could you please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?"

And Suzuki Roshi replied, "Everything changes."

The implication of this statement is enormous. But what's so interesting is that we all know this. We know it intellectually. We know it conceptually. There's nobody who would argue the point that everything changes. And yet, we haven't integrated that understanding fully in our lives, in the way we're relating to experience. Because if we really knew it, if it was in our bones, then we would not be clinging or attached to anything. We would know that everything is changing. So we have to practice seeing it and refining our perception of it.

As Dara mentioned in her beautiful talk last night, the most basic framework or principle in the Buddhist teachings is that all things, all experience, arises out of conditions, and that the conditions are continually

changing. Every aspect of our lives, every part of our experience is arising because the causes and conditions are there for that particular experience to arise. But we have to pay attention to the fact that those very causes and conditions which cause something to arise are continually shifting and changing—they're not stable.

So many times people have been leading peaceful, seemingly stable lives, and then in a moment conditions can change. We read of great natural disasters, all the stories both recent and long-standing of senseless violence, or accidents. You're going along and in a moment your life is changed. Disease. What's so crucial for us to understand is that none of us is exempt from this law of change. We tend to be able to see, "Oh yeah, it's changing for everybody else, but my life is stable." And this is the great delusion.

There's a story in the Mahabharata, one of the great Indian classics, where one of the characters, a wise sage, comments that the most remarkable thing in the world is that we see people dying all around us and yet we don't think it will happen to us. And of course, again, we know it will intellectually, but do we really get it? Do we really understand the impermanent nature of everything? Conditions are always changing.

Another one of my homegrown mantras, which has really served me very well: anything can happen anytime. We think we know how things are going to unfold, but really, anything can happen anytime. At first people might hear that and feel, "Oh, that would make me kind of paranoid, always on the watch for what might happen." But for me, it's exactly the opposite. By recognizing that anything can happen anytime, my heart became a lot less defensive about things happening, as changes occurred, particularly ones that were unwanted or unpleasant. Yes, anything can happen anytime. This is the law. This is the nature of things. So it actually created a sense of ease. It created a sense of the acceptance that Dara was speaking about in terms of the first noble truth.

The experience of change, or attention to it, can also come not only with big dramatic events or changes in our lives, but also just in the ordinary experiences that we have. I don't know if some of you have walked on the paths in the woods. The New England woods are amazing. We see miles and miles of these stone walls and stone foundations, empty foundations of old houses. It's not hard to imagine the people who lived there and created those walls and built those houses—their lives were as vivid and as compelling to them as our own lives are to us. And yet, what's left now? Stone walls in the woods.

The truth of change, the truth of impermanence, is so obvious in so much all around us. There are changes in nature, changes of weather, the changes in climate, the huge climatic changes that are happening now. We see the changing nature of our relationships. How much suffering have we been involved in because we have some idea that our relationship should stay a certain way? And of course it's impossible.

We're all changing. We're changing, our partners are changing, all our relationships are changing. We can see this change again in a very ordinary way, just in our own bodies and minds—and of course, that's what we're doing here in practice.

In your meditation, how many times have you had this experience? I've had it happen countless times: I would have a sitting that was very calm and concentrated, my mind pretty still. I'd get up, and then I'd come into the next sitting thinking it would just pick up from where it left off. But the next sitting might be filled with pain or discomfort or restlessness. Or the other way around—you have a really difficult sitting and come into the next one with a sense of dread, and you sit down and the mind settles.

There are examples of this process of change happening all around us, when we are paying attention carefully. I think I'll interject something here. This is something I usually suggest at the very beginning of a retreat, but it's not too late.

There's a meditative disease, and it's called "more or less mindful." We're going along through the day and we're more or less mindful. We're kind of there. We're not totally lost, but we're not really there. We're not there carefully. We're not there with precision. That's the kind of mindfulness we need to cultivate, and that's what can be cultivated so well on retreat, because you have nothing else to do. There are no excuses. Your only job is to pay careful attention. So watch the quality of your mindfulness through the day. Do you find yourself rushing from one activity to another? Rushing is great feedback that your mind is ahead of yourself—we're not settled back in our body, not really present.

Things are changing not only every week or every day or every hour. Things are actually changing every single moment. Things are disappearing and new things are arising moment after moment. And we can see that. We see it in a simple way—you don't have to be a super yogi to notice this.

So here's an experiment you can make, and this is going to be a memory test to see if you can remember this from now till the end of the talk. Because it's an experiment to make when you leave the hall. Finish the talk, ring the bell, and just as you leave, if you remember: pay attention, moment to moment, to all the changing experiences you have simply in getting up from your seat and leaving. All the changes of body sensations, the changes of what is being seen—the different colors and forms and shapes—the different sounds that come and go as people are leaving, the passing thoughts moving through.

If you're not in a "more or less mindful" state but really in a very attentive state, you will notice just in that short time how many different experiences are arising and passing away. And all of this is ordinary. This is not some big mystical experience. It's just the nature of things. It's how things are always happening.

Even with something we think of as unitary, within each of those experiences so many different things are happening. What just arose? A sound. We might think, "Oh yeah, a sound arose and passed away." But if we're listening carefully—how many different vibratory elements are within that one sound? How many changes are taking place just within that one sound?

And it's the same with each breath. We think, "Oh, in-breath, out-breath." And after a while, we get bored with it. First, it's interesting that we get bored with it. Would we be bored if somebody were holding our head underwater? We would not be bored with our breath. Each breath is literally sustaining our lives.

This is not poetry.

Every single breath is sustaining our life. Oh, how boring. The mind is so amazing. It's because we're not paying careful attention. Fritz Perls, the great psychologist, said that boredom is lack of attention. It's when we're half-hearted, when we're not close. And so when we come in close to experience—whether it's listening to a sound or the breath or a step or whatever it is—then the truth of change, the truth of impermanence is so obvious. We begin to see it in such a clear and precise way.

It's through the seeing of impermanence on this level, seeing it repeatedly and reflecting on it, really keeping it in mind—this is what loosens the grip of clinging and attachment, because we see that there's nothing we can really hold on to.

The liberating power of this perception of change was expressed in one very startling teaching of the Buddha. This is a statement that, if you think about it, is really quite shocking. He said it's better to live a single day seeing the momentary arising and passing of phenomena—seeing how experiences arise and pass away very quickly—better to live a single day seeing this than to live a hundred years without seeing it.

What is that saying about what we value in our lives and what we give energy to? It's pretty remarkable. But what the Buddha is pointing to is that the seeing of impermanence on this level is what liberates us. It's not just the accumulation of more experiences or more pleasant things in our lives, which is mostly, to a large extent, what we devote ourselves to. The Buddha is saying it's this seeing of impermanence that actually frees us.

So it's worth testing. It's not something necessarily to believe, but can we practice and test it for ourselves?

The Buddha gave very explicit instructions about this. He said, whatever feelings arise—whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and these feelings are arising with every single experience, every sight, sound, smell, everything we experience, tasting it as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—whatever feelings arise, abide contemplating impermanence in those feelings. Contemplate the passing away, the letting go of those feelings.

Here's the key point: contemplating thus, we do not cling to anything in this world. Contemplating the impermanence of these feelings of experience—contemplating thus, we do not cling to anything in this world. When we don't cling, there is no agitation. When not agitated, we personally attain Nibbana, enlightenment.

I had read that particular teaching many, many times, and I always took it as a description of how things were. Then on one retreat I read it again—and this is why reading over and over again the teachings matters, because each time you get another perspective. On this retreat I read it, and instead of just reading it as a description, I took it as an instruction, an instruction of investigation. The Buddha is saying that when we're seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. So I

decided to test it out, just watching for those times when I was seeing impermanence and noticing whether the mind is clinging.

We can do this right now. As I ring the bell—this is not hard to do—just listen and see if you can become aware, which again is really simple, of the impermanent nature of the sound, the flow-like nature. And as you're hearing the sound and are aware of its impermanence, its change, just turn the attention and see in those moments whether the mind is clinging or not. We're going to test the Buddha and see if he was right.

It's actually impossible to cling when you are right in the flow of the changes.

Then I took it a step further. He said when we see impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. So is that true? Let's try again. Seeing impermanence. No clinging. In no clinging, is there agitation? No. The mind settles easily into this place of non-agitation.

And then comes the great conclusion: when not agitated, we personally attain Nibbana. It's like this is the shortcut. It's all right here in a few simple steps. Seeing impermanence, mind doesn't cling. When not clinging, mind is not agitated. Not agitated—Nibbana.

But we have to see it. We have to see it in ourselves, and it's not hard to do. That's the point. We just have to take it from being Buddhist philosophy to an instruction for how we can look, how we can experience. And it's very simple.

We can also play with it in the reverse way. When we feel that we are agitated—when we're going through a sitting or just moving through our day and the mind is agitated—that can be feedback for us. The mind is agitated, which means I'm clinging to something. Because if the mind's not clinging, it's not agitated. So if it is agitated, it means we're clinging.

Instead of the agitation being a problem, something we struggle with, it becomes feedback, a wake-up call. Mind is agitated—take a look. Are we clinging to some thought, some feeling, some opinion? And that's how we actually, over time, free ourselves from the patterns of clinging and attachment.

In case we're still missing it, in case we still haven't quite honed in, as a great help to us the Buddha pointed out those areas where we habitually do cling. In case there's some confusion about where we're going to find this clinging—and this is what I love about the teachings—it's just very explicit.

He talked about different areas of clinging which most people get involved in one way or another. And of course the first and most obvious is the clinging to sense pleasures. We enjoy them. We like them. We want them to continue. We devote a lot of our lives to acquiring sense pleasures—good food, nice feelings in the body. Of course, the problem is that these sense pleasures, while there's nothing wrong with them, don't last. So they're not going to actually provide a lasting peace.

It's just a question of looking to see: are we getting agitated in our relationship to sense pleasures through clinging? Or can we simply be in our lives, enjoy them when they're present, but without devoting our

lives to their acquisition?

Sense desires—this is not a trivial thing. When Dara spoke of the second noble truth being craving, that understanding itself is quite extraordinary. Of all the things the Buddha could have said was the cause of suffering—craving. Of all the mindsets, it's that craving, that desire. And one of the things we desire is sense pleasures.

I had a ridiculous experience of this, and I've told this story over the years many times. It happened years ago, but it was so ridiculous that it stayed with me. I'd been in India for a couple of years—this is many years ago, forty-five years ago or so. I was young, enthusiastic about my practice, really into it. I'd been there long enough that my mind had developed some degree of concentration and stillness.

At different times, I would be having a sitting—that kind of sitting where you think you're going to get enlightened any minute. So I'm sitting there, just waiting for the big moment. We were staying in the Burmese temple in Bodh Gaya, just the few Westerners who were practicing there. The conditions were very basic, and the food was very basic. In the evening, they served just a couple of chapati and two really small bananas, about that big.

So I'm sitting, about to get enlightened. The tea bell rings, and I watched my mind: Enlightenment? Banana? Enlightenment or banana? And what's so amazing is that I got up for the banana.

So craving—don't underestimate the force of this in the mind. It goes really deep.

In addition to sense pleasures, on a more refined level, we also get attached and cling to pleasant meditative states. At first, most people go through a lot of difficulty and struggle, but at a certain point the body gets more easeful and the mind can get concentrated, and we can experience many deeply pleasant meditative states of calm, of peace, of joy, of lightness—lots of beautiful states. It becomes very easy to start practicing for them. We become attached to them.

And there's a very interesting description: at a particular place in our practice, all of the different factors of enlightenment, factors of awakening—like mindfulness and rapture and tranquility, all of the really beautiful things that we're practicing for—at a particular stage in practice, they are called corruptions of insight. Not because the states themselves are bad, but because at that particular point in practice we're so enamored of them that we get attached to the states and we forget about liberation through non-clinging. Liberation is not in those states. Liberation is in the mind that doesn't cling. So that's another arena to pay attention to.

There's a Thai laywoman from the last century who was probably the most famous lay teacher in Thailand of that time, and very unusual—in that culture, for a lay woman to be a teacher is not usual because of the big monastic hierarchy. But she was this extraordinary woman who just created a very small hermitage, and still as a layperson, devoted her life to practice. Her name was Upasika Kee. There's a book of her teachings called *Pure and Simple*, which is a wonderful book. If at some point you have a

chance to read it, the teachings are powerfully direct, and they're all about freedom. They're all about liberation.

I just want to read one small part. She said, "If you want to see the real essence of the Dhamma, we have to look deeply, profoundly. Then it's simply a matter of letting go all along the way. The theme of non-clinging covers everything from beginning to end."

The whole book is really just an elaboration of that. We have to look deeply and profoundly—not more or less mindfully, but really connected in each moment, seeing the impermanence, the flow. Then it's simply a matter of letting go all along the way. The theme of non-clinging covers everything from beginning to end. We want to take this in, because this can really inform our understanding of the teachings and of our own practice.

So there is attachment to sense pleasures or to meditative pleasures. We can also become attached—and often do—to our views and opinions about things. I have another little mantra: certainty is not an indication of truth. Just because we have an opinion and are certain about it, the certainty doesn't make it true.

It's really interesting, just as we examine our own minds and in listening to other people, especially in this election year, to see the difference—especially in ourselves—between an opinion and what we really know. Because it's quite amazing how we can be attached to an opinion about things we know nothing about, but it doesn't stop us from having an opinion. It's just to see that. It's not an insignificant thing.

And even about things we really do know, where we really do have some experience of it, I find that it's really helpful to keep an open mind, not to be attached even to what we might really feel we do know. Because if we're not attached to it, it just leaves us open to further discovery or different perspectives. It allows our life to unfold.

So this attachment to sense pleasures, to meditative pleasures, attachment to views and opinions—the deepest attachment we have, and really the source, you could say the ultimate source or a deep source of so much suffering in the world, is attachment to the idea, the concept of self, of "I."

And of course this is probably the most difficult aspect of the Buddhist teachings to understand. It's so counterintuitive, because we live our lives revolving about, centered in, this sense of ourselves—as if there's some being, some reference point to whom all experience is happening. I'm the one who's hearing, and I'm the one who's seeing, and I'm the one who's thinking. Our whole life revolves around this mental construct of the reference point of self, of "I."

This takes a lot of just sitting with it. First, listening and hearing about it, because it's difficult to understand. But through the meditation practice and our Dharma practice, we can begin to get some glimpses of what this might mean.

And this is so fundamental to the Buddhist teaching: this constructed reference point of self, of "I," happens when we are not paying careful attention to the composite, impermanent nature of experience. In this flow of rapidly changing phenomena in the mind, in the body, when we're not paying careful attention—as Upasika Kee said, profound attention—in this rapid flow of phenomena, of physical, mental experience, we identify with various aspects of that experience, just unconsciously. We identify with it as being self.

I'll just give you examples of how we do this, and we do it most of the time. Most of us are very identified with our bodies. Who am I? We wake up in the morning, look in the mirror—yeah, that's me.

We take the body to be self. There was once an advertisement in the New York Times for a t-shirt that said, "Me, me, me." I want to do an IMS t-shirt that says, "Not me, not me, not me."

But especially these days, with medical technology, we have a whole window into a different perspective. I had a friend who had laparoscopic surgery for a benign tumor. They go in with a little video camera—it's amazing how they do it. After the surgery, she actually came out with the video. She had no interest in looking at it, but I did. It was extraordinary. It was like a journey without going to an autopsy, like being on the inside of the body. You saw the organs and the blood and everything that's in there.

From that view, would you identify with your liver? "Yes, the liver is me." Or the gallbladder—"Yeah, that's who I am. I'm the gallbladder." No, when you see what's actually in there, you're not likely to identify with it. But we wrap it all nicely in skin, make this nice package, and then we get attached. We get attached to this body, get very attached to other people's bodies, because we're not seeing deeply.

So that's one thing we can begin to explore: how we're creating the sense of self through identification with this body by not really understanding or seeing what the body actually is.

We create a sense of self when we're lost in and identified with thoughts. Just in these last days, countless hours being carried away in thought trains. I'm thinking, I'm planning, I'm judging. We identify with the thought. The thought itself is not a problem—it's just like a little bubble in the mind. My first teacher, Munindra-ji, used to say, "The thought is the thinker." It's not that there's someone who's having the thought. The thought is a mental phenomenon rising out of conditions. It does its thing, which is to think, and then passes away. But we claim it because we're not paying attention, we're not seeing its impermanent nature. The thoughts come in and unconsciously we become identified with them, creating the sense of self in that.

We create the sense of self when we're identified with the different emotions that arise, with all the stories we make up about ourselves. "I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm excited, I'm enthusiastic, I'm depressed." The "I" is extra. All of these emotions are conditioned experiences arising out of causes and conditions, just like cloud formations. Conditions come together, the cloud forms. Conditions change, the clouds dissolve. Conditions come together internally, externally, and an emotion arises. Conditions change, the

emotion passes.

But because we're not seeing that clearly, how often are we identified in, lost in, and sometimes overwhelmed by the emotions? Because we think, "Yes, this is me, this is who I am." So not only do we go, "I'm angry" or "I'm sad" or "I'm happy," we then create an even bigger structure: "I'm an angry person," or "I'm a fearful person," or "I'm a happy person." We're building a superstructure of self on top of momentary changing conditions. We can observe this now as we're watching our own process.

The most subtle level of identification—the one that's hardest to see in terms of how we create and feed and strengthen the sense of self—is our identification with consciousness, with awareness itself. We may see all these other experiences are changing. The body we may see is changing, and even as we get more skilled, we see thoughts and emotions as changing. But "I'm the one who's knowing it all." In that identification with the knowing, we create that separate sense of the witness, the observer of experience, apart from experience.

Here we really need a lot of interest and practice to begin to understand the very nature and process of consciousness itself.

What is knowing? This is a great mystery.

Before I just touch on a couple of ways that we might cut through this identification with knowing, I want to emphasize that in understanding on a deeper and deeper level that the sense of self is a construct, it doesn't mean that in that realization or understanding—as we understand selflessness—we disappear somehow. There's no magic trick. On a conventional level, we are operating from that space. I'm speaking to you. I buy clothes that fit me, not fit you. There's understanding. On the conventional level, we're using this concept, so there's no problem with that.

This was expressed very well by a Tibetan teacher when he was asked about this. He said, "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. You are real. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerated."

I love that. On the conventional level, we are real, and we live our lives in that place, and that's fine. But we want to get to that place of understanding that we're not *really* real—that underneath all of that, there's no substantial, self-existing thing living inside. This is profound. This is a revolutionary way of understanding life and who we are. That's why the Buddha's enlightenment was such an extraordinary awakening. It was an extraordinary realization.

So how can we cut through this most subtle identification with knowing? How do we let go of the sense of being the knower, the observer?

One technique which I worked with in my practice, which I found very effective, was simply changing the way I was languaging experience to myself. Usually, the way we language experience in English,

grammatically we're using the active voice: I'm walking, I'm thinking, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. There's a subject, a verb, an object. In my practice—especially in walking—I started reframing it in the passive voice. While walking and just feeling the sensations, I began to frame it as "sensations being known." Instead of "I'm knowing the sensations," which right in the language creates the sense of self, changing to the passive voice: "Sensations are being known."

Let's use the bell again. *The sound being known.* In that framing, we're not creating, in our very language, the sense of self. It's just experience being known.

The great philosopher Wittgenstein said, "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." Language is powerful. Language conditions how we experience things. And so just a simple shift of language can give us a different perspective.

I'd suggest, if you're interested, when you do some walking, just keep it very simple. Walk, and "movement is being known." The sensations of the movement are being known. Notice how effortlessly that knowing is happening—and that it's not that anyone is doing it. It's being known quite spontaneously.

Another way of cutting through the identification with knowing is very classic—this is classic vipassanā teachings. It's realizing that in every moment of experience, two things are happening: there's knowing and an object. There's knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, knowing of a thought, knowing of an emotion. Our life, our experience, is really a pairwise progression: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

When you're paying careful attention to the moment-to-moment unfolding of experience, just take a look at that. See how in every moment there's what's being known and the knowing of it. As our mind gets more and more tuned to that, we begin to see that the knowing itself is arising and passing along with the object. We're seeing the impermanent nature of consciousness.

Knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object—arising and passing away. This perception also cuts through identification, offering yet another doorway.

There's another approach found extensively in the Zen and Tibetan traditions, a very powerful teaching. The instruction is actually to look for your mind, to look for the knowing. Things are being known—known by what? You take a look. Can you find what is knowing it? What's really interesting is that no matter how hard you look, there's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening. This is the great mystery of consciousness, of awareness.

There's a book about the history of the number zero, and the title is *The Nothing That Is*. I saw that title and simply had to get the book. I could only understand the first paragraph, really. But that was enough—everything I needed was right there. In the opening lines, the book says: look at zero and you see nothing; look through it and you see the world. What a beautiful expression of the nature of mind, the nature of awareness. Look at zero, look at awareness—you see nothing. Look through it and you see the

world. This offers another way of exploration.

One last story, a famous one. This is a Zen encounter between Bodhidharma and the person who would eventually become his disciple. When you listen to this story, it has a kind of Zen witticism to it, and people often respond to that witty aspect. But it's actually profound. So suppress the laugh and really listen—you could get enlightened hearing this.

Bodhidharma, as you may know, brought Buddhism from India to China. He was a fierce teacher, sitting in a cave supposedly for nine years, facing a wall. This seeker comes to him, very upset, suffering tremendously, genuinely searching. He entreats Bodhidharma: please help me pacify my mind. At first Bodhidharma ignores him, but finally he emerges and engages. The man says, "I've been suffering tremendously"—and this was deep, profound suffering—"Please, please pacify my mind." Bodhidharma responds: "Show me your mind. Present me your mind." The seeker says, "I've looked for it everywhere and I can't find it." And Bodhidharma replies: "There—it's already pacified."

That is an amazing teaching, one that can actually be applied. I've done this even while going for a walk. If my mind is caught up in something, a little disturbed, I'll remember that exchange: look for the mind, there's nothing to find. There—it's already pacified in the awareness that there's nothing to find. It's like that earlier teaching: no clinging, no agitation, Nibbāna. This offers a very direct way of simply looking for the mind. The not-finding is the finding.

So again, all of these are different approaches to liberation through non-clinging. We accomplish this through seeing impermanence, through exploring those arenas where we actually do cling, through the direct experience of selflessness—recognizing that there's no one behind the process to whom it's happening, that what we call self is the process of change itself.

I'll conclude with one other teaching of the Buddha: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Whoever hears this has heard all the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings."

Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings.

This is what we're really doing here together. We're practicing for this level of understanding.

I'll close with one last poem. This is from Teijitsu, who was the abbess of a Zen nunnery in the eighteenth century. From her writings:

She saw that all phenomena arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that the knowing of this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this, no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

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