Collage (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 56:56

Tonight's talk is a bit of a collage of topics that are of interest to me. I hope they'll be of some interest to you.

I want to start with a quote by John Lennon, which is only peripherally related to the talk. "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment. And I told them they didn't understand life."

So tonight's talk is a bit about understanding life, and perhaps happiness. It builds on Anushka's talk last night, which outlined the five aggregates—a template that the Buddha gave very often. It's found frequently in the suttas and discourses as a way of beginning to understand the notion of selflessness.

In the teachings, impermanence is easy to understand. Even if we have not fully actualized it in the way we live, it's not a difficult concept to grasp. And dukkha is not hard to grasp—we all have a very immediate experience of it. But the teachings on selflessness are not intuitively obvious. In a way, they go against our common sense experience of things. You could go up to anybody on the street and ask them whether things are impermanent or whether there are difficulties in life, and of course they would agree. But if you go up and ask them, "Do you really exist?" that would raise some questions.

In talking about selflessness, the first and important thing to realize is that the self is not something we need to get rid of. It really is not there in the first place, and we are misperceiving our experience.

An example which I have been giving for the last forty-two years—some of you have probably heard it that many times—is the example of the constellation, the Big Dipper. You're all familiar with the Big Dipper? On a clear night, you look up at the sky and you see that constellation.

So what is this, the sixth or seventh day of the retreat? This is a little midterm exam: Is there really a Big Dipper up in the sky?

There's no Big Dipper. There are some points of light, which we take to be stars, in a certain pattern. We see the pattern in a certain way, and we give it the name "Big Dipper." But when you realize that there's no Big Dipper, does anything change in the sky? No. Everything is as it always was. We're just seeing it more clearly, in the sense that we're seeing it free of concepts. This is not to say that concepts are not useful, because if you happen to be in the middle of the Pacific Ocean navigating a canoe, the Big Dipper points to the North Star, and you can navigate that way. So concepts can be useful, but it's important to realize that it is a concept.

The self is not something we need to get rid of. It's not there in the first place. Self is like Big Dipper. The real question and source of investigation is how the sense of self is created in the first place. What are we doing in our experience that gives rise to the feeling of self, the sense of self, which we all have and in which we all live?

Over these last days, we've been talking a lot—and I think you've experienced very often—that as experience unfolds, we have the tendency at different times, often frequently, to identify with what's arising as being I, as being self. It's that mental process of identifying that creates the felt sense of self. "My body," or "I'm feeling these sensations," "my thought," "my emotions."

I mentioned the other night the famous Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw. At one point in his writings, he listed—it was a long list—very common experiences, all of which he called wrong view. What was on the list? "I'm angry, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm excited, I'm enthusiastic, I'm bored"—and on and on. This is just the normal way we experience things. What's the wrong view? The "I." Claiming these emotions as being self, as being I, rather than seeing the experience as it is: anger angers, fear fears, love loves. Each quality is expressing its own nature. None of them belong to anyone.

You might have seen over these last days, and gotten a glimpse, that sensations come and go and you can sometimes be with them without personalizing them. Perhaps you've seen thoughts arising and passing away and begun to get a sense that they're coming from the person behind you—that they're not really yours.

And perhaps you've had a sense with different emotions—seeing how they arise out of conditions and pass away—and getting a glimpse of their selflessness.

But the hardest place to understand selflessness, to deconstruct that sense of I, is in our relationship to consciousness, to knowing. Because even as we see all of these other experiences arising and passing, and perhaps getting a glimpse of their non-self aspect, still there's that strong feeling: *I'm* the one knowing it all. And so we create that sense of the observer or the witness, and that's where the I resides. You could think of consciousness or awareness or knowing as the last hideout of self—the most difficult place to see clearly without identifying with it.

So tonight I'd like to talk about four different ways of working with knowing, working with consciousness, with awareness, in ways that could help us understand it without taking it to be I, without identifying with it. These different approaches come from different traditions. Different Buddhist traditions have different methodologies for understanding this.

The first one is a very classical teaching in the Theravada tradition: the understanding that in every moment, two things are happening. There's knowing and an object arising simultaneously. What is hearing? There's knowing of a sound. What is seeing? Knowing of a sight, knowing of a smell, a taste, knowing of a sensation, knowing of a thought. Our experience—and this is one of the insights that

happens in the course of vipassana unfolding—is this pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

Now it's important to understand that the knowing and the object are distinct but not separable. They're two different things. This is a rather strange example, but if you lifted the arm of a corpse, the movement would be there—the physical sense of movement would be there. But is there any knowing? As far as we can tell, not. The corpse doesn't know anything, and yet the physical movement is there. So when we move our arms, there's the same movement, but something else is there as well: the knowing of the movement.

So far so good? Just knowing an object. They're arising simultaneously. You can't separate them, but they're two distinct phenomena. It's kind of like when you look at something that has both color and form. But are color and form the same thing? No. They're two distinct aspects. But you can't separate them—the color is always in a form, and the form has a color. So they're two inseparable but distinct aspects. This mind-body, this process of knowing an object, is like that. They're arising simultaneously. We can't separate them, but they are distinguishable.

And so when you're sitting or walking, you might give emphasis to really seeing and examining, or just recognizing, that in any moment this is what's happening: there's a knowing and an object. Knowing and an object. You're taking a step—there's the movement and the knowing of it. Taking a breath—there's the sensations and the knowing of them.

As the mindfulness gets stronger, we begin to see with greater and greater clarity this process: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, very quickly arising and passing. This is a very important stage in the progress of insight because it is the first real glimpse of selflessness. We see that all that there is is this progression of knowing an object, knowing an object. It's not that it's happening to someone; what we are is this process of knowing an object arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing. And so it gives a real taste of the selflessness of consciousness because we see that it's actually arising and passing in each moment.

This is one way into beginning our understanding of not being identified with knowing, not creating a knower. That's one avenue in.

Another avenue is to see the constructed nature of consciousness—that knowing or consciousness arises out of causes.

And the Buddha laid out pretty clearly what the causes were for consciousness to arise.

I first explored this particular aspect when I was on retreat at the Forest Refuge in Barre. I was in the dining room eating, and I made a little thought experiment. This is a sidebar: even though we encourage you not to get lost in thought, it's not to say that thought cannot be a very useful tool of reflection and investigation. Some years ago I read the biography of Einstein, and it's quite amazing. His brilliant understanding of the nature of the universe came through thought experiments. He wasn't an

experimental physicist. It was this amazingly creative and intuitive understanding that came through thought experiments.

So my own thought experiment in the dining room of the Forest Refuge does not quite rise to the level of Einstein, but it rises to the level of Goldstein.

Taste consciousness. Eating, just watching the process of eating. I don't know if you've really paid attention, but it's amazing what the tongue does. It is the strangest organ, this thing in the mouth. I've been told—I'm not sure this is true—that the tongue is the strongest muscle in the body. But it's certainly very effective.

So how does taste consciousness arise? The Buddha explained it arises when four conditions are present. We need the tongue. We need food on the tongue. We need some moisture, saliva. And we need attention. If those four conditions are there, taste consciousness will arise.

I did a little thought experiment. Knowing that, I was just eating and simply imagined where the taste would arise if there were no tongue. Obviously not. Or if there were no attention. If I took any one of those conditions away, taste consciousness wouldn't be there.

We can do this with all of the sense doors. How does seeing consciousness arise? We have the working organ of the eyes. We have something coming in front. There's light and attention. If those four conditions are there, seeing consciousness will arise. Take any one of those conditions away, we don't see.

I often do this when I'm going for a walk. I'll just play at the different sense doors using this little thought experiment, taking one of the causal conditions away, and it becomes so clear. It's like a moment of popping through, of realizing that consciousness, the knowing, is itself conditioned. It's conditioned by these causes, and take any one of those causes away, the consciousness is not there.

So that's another way of understanding the not-self nature of it. There's no "I" in that mix. It's just causes. Causes come together, consciousness arises. That's the second way we can begin to experiment and really look for ourselves, investigate for ourselves.

The third way now moves into the teachings of another tradition. It's found more in some of the Zen traditions and Tibetan traditions, where the suggestion for investigation is to look for the mind, to look for the knowing, to look for the awareness, and see if you can find it.

There's a very famous Zen dialogue, actually from China, Chan. Bodhidharma brought Buddhism from India to China. He was reputedly this very fierce guy sitting in a cave for nine years. A seeker came to him named Huike. Huike was in great distress, and at first Bodhidharma was just ignoring him. As this rather weird legend goes, Huike cut off his arm to show his sincerity. So Bodhidharma agreed to come out of his cave. We're much easier. And Huike says, "Venerable sir, I'm in such distress."

I'm suffering so much. Please pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind and I'll pacify it."

Huike says, "I've looked for it everywhere and I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There, I've pacified it."

Now before I proceed—the dialogue goes back and forth a couple of times, and in the end it sounds like a little witticism, so people often just take it on that level. But it's actually a profound truth. Try to hear it in that way.

This is a very direct pointing. When we look for the mind, there's nothing to find. When we look for the knowing, it can't be found. When you look for awareness, you can't find it—and yet the knowing is there.

In some traditions, they refer to that non-findability as an experience of emptiness. Different traditions use the term "emptiness" in different ways, but it's very interesting. When you're sitting, I enjoy doing this a lot with sound. If I'm sitting and sounds are just arising, sometimes I'll ask myself the question: Can I find what's knowing the sound? I know I'm knowing it because I'm hearing. But then when I look to see—can I find what it is that's knowing?—there's nothing to find, even though the knowing is there.

When we begin to experience the non-findability of awareness, of knowing, that's another doorway into understanding its selfless nature. There's nothing there to find, even as knowing happens. So that's the third way to look for the mind.

The fourth way is something that came to me quite a few years ago in my practice, and it really transformed my practice. It was simply a turn of language—how I was languaging things to myself.

There's an interesting quote by Wittgenstein: "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." How we language things conditions how we experience things, but we are so immersed in our language from very early on that we don't even see how it shapes our perception.

The big turn for me came—I don't know what gave rise to the thought—but usually we language our experience in the active voice. "I'm seeing, I'm hearing, I'm doing this, I'm going there." There's a subject, a verb, and an object. I started reframing, re-languaging things in the passive voice. For example, in walking: "sensations being known"—not "I'm knowing the sensations." In the movement, the sensations are being known.

In re-languaging it that way to myself and actually practicing within that framework, there were some quite remarkable consequences. One is that everything is being known completely effortlessly. Just as a little experiment, if you move your arm with that frame, you could say, "the movement, sensations being known." Aren't they being known just as you're moving? You can move fast, you can dance, or you can move really slowly—and they're just being known. All by itself. Completely effortless.

And not only is it effortless, you begin to see that experience is being known exactly in the moment of its

arising. The knowing doesn't lag, it's not ahead—precisely as it's happening, it's being known. And no one's doing anything. There's this effortlessness, this precision, this exactitude to it.

I would experiment with this a little bit, if you're interested—both in the sitting, with the sensation of the breath being known, and in walking, where the movement is so obvious and just being known. If you get to a place—and this is not difficult—where it's just happening really easily for you, that's simply the language construct through which you're experiencing things. Just things being known, moment after moment: a movement, a sound, a thought—things being known.

If you practice just a little bit and you find it easeful, then you could ask a very telling question: Things are being known—known by what? You're turning the attention back towards the knowing. And again we find the same thing as Huike: Known by what?

There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is there. This is the great mystery of awareness, the great mystery of consciousness. This passive voice construction and practicing in that way can give a very immediate sense of the selflessness of the whole process, the selflessness of knowing. No one's doing anything.

The great contribution of the passive voice, which is generally unacknowledged in society at large, is that there's no subject. It takes the subject out of the picture. And so we're just in this experience of things being known moment after moment, being known effortlessly, no one there. Some people might call that a non-dual awareness or selfless awareness because there's no subject, there's no "I" in that experience. So that's another way you can begin to explore this.

Just a quick recap. Four different approaches to beginning to explore the selflessness of consciousness, the selflessness of awareness. One is the insight into the fact that this process is just a sequence, a pairwise progression—moment after moment, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. You can really be with your experience in that way. Notice this. This is how it's happening. You don't have to create it. It's just to notice that in every moment, that's what's happening, and that's all that's happening. And it's not happening to someone. What we are is that process—knowing an object, knowing an object.

Second, causes and conditions: to see how consciousness arises because of different causes, and you can check that out through the different examples I mentioned.

Third, you might play the role or the little dialogue in your mind of Bodhidharma and Huike. Sometimes I'll use that dialogue. If I'm going along and my mind is disturbed by something, or just caught up in something—being very familiar with that whole dialogue of "I'm suffering, please pacify my mind," "Show me your mind," "Nothing to find," "Already pacified"—I've just used the shorthand. When I'm right in the middle of something, I'll just say to myself, "Already pacified." And it reminds me that if you look for the mind, there's nothing to find. In that nothing to find, there's no problem. Just a little phrase that a Sri Lankan monk once used—he said, "No self, no problem." And we can drop into that space, even if it's just

for a few moments at a time. So: already pacified.

And then the fourth is that practice of reframing your experience as you're going along in that passive voice, of just different things being known. I would highly recommend particularly this last one, because once you settle into that frame, the practice becomes so effortless. We've taken the "I" out of the whole process—the "I" which is struggling to be mindful and struggling in whatever way you struggle. It's just things being known, moment after moment. There's a great lightness and ease in that way of practice.

The second part of the collage. This first one had to do with practicing, investigating, not identifying with consciousness, seeing the selfless nature of awareness. The second topic of interest actually arose just in my last retreat. Over the winter I was sitting for about six weeks, and a line of the teachings came to mind which I mentioned in the earlier talk. This is a line that you find often in the suttas: when somebody got enlightened, they would often express their enlightenment with the phrase, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Remember I talked about that in the impermanence talk. You find this line very often.

So I was sitting, and it came to mind. Usually I would read that line simply as a description—people describing the nature of things. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Yes, got that. But in this particular sitting, I took that line more as an instruction. Right in the sitting, as I was just there in the flow of experience—different sensations and sounds and thoughts, all the experiences of our practice—I was there in the flow of it, and I dropped this sentence right in the middle: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." And something quite

unexpected happened. What is the implication of that sentence? Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. When I dropped it right into the middle of my practice, it became crystal clear that there is nothing to want, because whatever I might want will also pass away.

In the context of meditation, there's a phenomenon that is very common. Probably most of you are practicing in this way, and certainly I've seen it in myself very often. Being in the flow of experience, but with a slight leaning into the next moment. It's like we're with the breath in order for the next breath. Or we're with a sensation in order for it to unfold in a certain way. Or we're with an emotion for something. There's what I call the "in order to" mind—we're with this in order for something. It can be very subtle, the subtlest energetic leaning into the process.

The Buddha called this, in the Second Noble Truth when he talked about the cause of suffering, craving. The first kind of craving we're very familiar with is just the craving for sense pleasures. But the second is more subtle and more pervasive. He called it craving for becoming. There's a wanting something to happen, a sense that this is leading someplace.

When I dropped this line in—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—it's like there is nothing to become, because whatever it is will also pass away. And so for that moment, the mind just

stopped that forward lean. The Four Noble Truths in that moment became so clarified. It became so clear that this craving for becoming, even on a moment-to-moment level, is what keeps us on this whole whirlwind of samsara. We're craving the next moment, and the next moment, and the next moment.

This illuminated the essence of the practice. If you get this, you've got everything. The essence of the practice is not becoming anything. It's not having some new meditative experience, because whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. The essence of the practice is in not craving anything. It's that dropping back into not wanting.

This was very surprising. I had no idea that this would come just from dropping that phrase into my mind. You might want to experiment with that. Do you have that sense, as you practice, of how often there's a leaning—just a subtle sense that we're with this in order for something? We think that's what the meditation is about, to become something. But the freedom is exactly the opposite. The freedom is in not becoming, not craving.

We can do this anytime. You can touch the deepest aspects of the practice in any moment when you realize that it's this—this is the move, not that. So you might experiment with that and see if it's useful for you.

That's the second part of the collage. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—really using the implications of that very profound statement. It's not just a throwaway line. It's pointing to the very essence of the practice.

The third aspect came from reading a series of talks by a Sri Lankan monk named Ñāṇananda. He's a very revered monk in Sri Lanka, deeply immersed in the suttas and the texts, knowing them perfectly and very accomplished in his practice. He gave a series of lectures—I think it was something like thirty-six or thirty-seven lectures on Nibbāna.

So I thought, oh, this will be interesting. It was a mind stretch. You can go to "Ajahn Google," and they're all online. It's amazing—you want thirty-seven lectures on Nibbana? There they are. They are a mind stretch. He was talking about the Dharma in ways that were so unusual and so subtle. I really needed to be reading it when I was in a very quiet practice space, trying to really understand the words.

But in all of those lectures, there's one image he used which I found very useful in my practice, and that's what I want to mention this evening.

He used the image of a river flowing to the ocean. You could think of that as the stream leading to Nibbana. So we're in the stream. But what is this river? What is this stream? It's when we are in the flow of impermanence—when we're just in our experience, in that flow of things arising and passing, arising and passing, just going along with no obstructions. We're in the flow, we're in the current. And in fact, that is the current leading to Nibbana.

Then he used the example of what happens when the current of the water hits an obstacle, like a rock. As the water goes over the rock, it creates a little vortex, and sometimes an eddy, where the current goes in the opposite direction to the main flow. He used this example of the vortex and the eddy for those times when we're in the flow of impermanence, but then we get caught by something creating the sense of self. We're no longer in the flow; instead, we're in the eddy, going around and around in whatever our little story or fixation or attachment is, until at a certain point we come out of the eddy and are back in the flow of impermanence.

As a kind of example of this, years ago I was on a whitewater rafting trip up in—I can't remember exactly—I think it was the Snake River up in Idaho. Along with the main rafts, the guides had these little flimsy rubber kayaks that people could go in individually just to play in the river. I thought, oh, that looks like fun. So I get into one and I'm kind of paddling, and then the guide shouts out to me, "Watch out for the hole in the river!" I had no idea what he was talking about. I'm from central Massachusetts; it didn't mean anything to me. Until a few moments later. Because the water current was going over something and into a vortex, I was really pulled down. I was pulled down under the water. Fortunately, I was wearing a life vest. That popped me back up. The vortex pulled me down again. Then again, the life jacket popped me up and I was back in the stream.

So in our practice, when we get caught—whether it's in the vortex or in the eddy—mindfulness is like that life jacket. Mindfulness is the life vest. When we get caught and we remember to be mindful, we disidentify with whatever it is that's arising and we're back in the flow of the current towards Nibbana.

I found it very interesting, both in the sitting, in the walking, and in moving about, to watch for that change of experience—to just be paying attention. We're in the flow and everything is going along smoothly, and then something happens and we're no longer in that forward-moving current. Maybe we're lost in some thought, some story, or we're caught up in some reaction. I even noticed that I could be going along and then if I have a task to do, just that would often prompt the fall into the vortex. "Oh, I have a purpose now in doing something." It's so easy in that moment.

You might notice this when you're in your room doing different things, or in your work. Do you keep that sense of the forward flow, of just the flow of impermanence through all those activities, or do things get solidified? There's a self here, and I have to do something. It becomes very interesting to watch the alternation of being in the forward current

and then caught in an eddy of self, or whirlpool of self, and then at a certain point recognizing that, and then back in the current again. It became a very visceral way, a visceral feedback for when I was caught. And so you might, if it's of interest, just play with that.

This is the last of the collage. Have you had the experience sometimes of waking up in the morning and then just for a few moments or a couple of minutes, dropping back to sleep again, a quick little dream in that space, and then again waking up and being awake? I think that's fairly common, except for really

good yogis who pop up totally awake.

So I was having the not-so-good yogi experience of dropping back to sleep and a little dream. This was while I was on retreat. Then I was doing walking meditation, and I began to notice just the quickly passing thoughts that came through. They weren't disturbing. They were really light, not a whole big story. Just walking and—*shh*—a thought passes.

I realized that for the most part, I really was not paying attention to that phenomena because they were not disturbing. It didn't feel like they were pulling me out of the current. But when I looked more carefully at those kinds of thoughts, which happen innumerable times during the day, I realized that for those moments of being lost, it was exactly the same experience as going back into the dream state after waking. It felt exactly the same. You're awake and then you're asleep for a couple of moments with a little dream, and then you're awake again. Going along, a thought comes through, and even if it's quick, if we're not aware of it, in that moment it's as if we dropped into a momentary dream state. And then we're out and we're back with what's happening.

And then I noticed something else about these thoughts—that mostly, or certainly a good many of them, were self-referential in some way. Not particularly in a disturbing way or a big way, but maybe it was planning or just commenting on something. Many of the thoughts had a sense of self in the content. And so I realized that for all these times, in walking and moving about the day with all these very many passing thoughts, many of which have some idea of self in them, I was dreaming myself into existence. I was dreaming the self into existence.

So I started using that phrase throughout the day: stop dreaming yourself into existence. But what that takes—and again, I recommend this, it would really refine your practice a lot, not only here on retreat but in our lives in the world—is to give some attention, really set the intention to keep an eye out for these quick thoughts that go by, whether in the sitting or the walking. It's really a fun game because they're happening frequently, so it wakes us up frequently if we're actually paying attention to them. And it becomes so clear that when we're lost in a thought, we're in a dream. It becomes so clear through the observation of that process.

So this is another suggestion for practice. And it's another way of understanding or tapping into the experience of selflessness, because so much of the sense of self comes in these dreamlike thoughts. We are dreaming the self into existence. And in that sense, when we're paying attention to that, we are really waking up from the dream.

These were the topics of interest. I'll just close with a little reading from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the greatest of the Tibetan masters of the last century. His writings are profound and clear; he's a brilliant teacher.

He said: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the realms of samsara for

countless past lifetimes—the idea of an enduring self. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that view of I, you would find it easy to be free and to free others too. Use any practice you do to dissolve this idea of I and the self-oriented motivations that accompany it."

That's really an important line. As long as that sense of I, sense of self, is there and strong, so many of the motivations in our lives are rooted in that self-center. Use any practice you do to dissolve this idea of I and the self-oriented motivations that accompany it.

And this last line is really applicable: "Even if you do not succeed in the beginning, keep trying."

At one point at our center in Barre, the Insight Meditation Society, we received a letter addressed to the Instant Meditation Society.

You might reflect back on Kamala's great talk on patience. This is a process. Everything I've spoken about today is an unfolding process of understanding.

So let's sit together for just a few minutes.

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