Day 8 Morning Sit (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:21:23

This morning we'll just have a quiet sit. You've heard quite a bit of instructions by now, so it's time to apply them in the great awakening.

Before opening to questions, I'd like to give a short teaching on the nature of time. Now that we're in the glide path towards the ending of the retreat, it's not uncommon for a lot of planning thoughts to be arising in the mind—thinking about what you're going to do after the retreat, who you're going to meet, what you're going to say. This is a very good opportunity to investigate just how it is that we create the notion of past and future, and then how we live much of our lives in the story of that construct.

How do we actually experience the past? We're sitting or walking and we have certain kinds of thoughts—planning, anticipating, imagining. We see those thoughts, and unconsciously, through our education and conditioning, we create a concept called "past" to describe those kinds of thoughts. We have certain memories, and out of those memories we create the concept. And then—this is what's really interesting—through some quite bizarre mental gymnastics, we've created this concept in our mind called "past" and then somehow throw it back behind us, as if the past is actually back there as some kind of reality. But how are we actually experiencing it? We're experiencing it as a thought in the moment. That's really what's happening: a certain kind of thought. But we get lost in the concept that we've created to describe that class of thoughts.

The same thing happens with the future. We're just sitting, minding our own business, and these thoughts of planning and anticipation arise in the mind. We create the concept "future," and then again, kind of throw it out ahead of us, as if the future is really out there waiting for us to catch up. But the only way we are actually experiencing it is as a thought in the moment.

Why is this important? For me, it was tremendously liberating to see this very clearly, because for the most part in our lives, we are living burdened by these concepts of past and future. It's like we're carrying these mountains on our shoulders. It would be very interesting for you to observe just how much of the time the mind is lost in the idea of past, in the idea of future—with regret or nostalgia or anticipation. All kinds of emotions and feelings and mind states arise because we're carrying these concepts and imbuing them with a certain reality.

The difference between going through life carrying this burden of past and future and seeing that these are just thoughts in the moment is profound. Thoughts in the moment, as I hope you've seen by now, are incredibly light. There's not much to them. And yet we live our lives burdened by these concepts of time.

Now, this is not a discussion of some scientific or metaphysical nature of time—that's something else entirely. This is about how we experience it for ourselves. And the experience of it is only as a thought in the moment.

I would suggest undertaking an investigation of this. Toward this part of the retreat, particularly with future thoughts, they're going to be coming. It's really a chance for you to see very directly and very clearly that this whole future story which you may have created and then inhabit is nothing more than a thought in the moment.

This does not imply that we don't take appropriate action or make decisions with regard to these thoughts. Sometimes we plan, and it's actually about doing something and accomplishing something. We can still respond to these thoughts, but it's a very different response if we're seeing, "Yes, this is a thought in the moment. Do I need to act on this or not?" Most of the time we're just lost in reverie and no action is required. To see it just as a thought really frees us from the grip of these concepts.

Even when it's appropriate to plan, we can do that while seeing that we're responding to a thought in the moment, that it's actually happening right now, rather than being lost in some imagined future scenario. It's a very different mind state and a very different quality of freedom as we negotiate these thoughts and ideas.

When I saw this, it was totally transforming—understanding that basically the past and future are in the present. They're not out there, in terms of how we're experiencing them.

That's been extremely helpful, even though I knew that. Hearing it from people with cred really helped. But I think what would be even more helpful would be to know what to look out for in terms of too loose. What does that look like? What does that feel like?

Okay, too loose. There's a description of the mind state of too loose and then the manifestation of too loose.

The mind state of too loose is what I call "more or less mindful." We're going along and we're kind of there, but not really there. There's a lot of background or even foreground mental activity even as we are somewhat connected to what's happening. The manifestation of it is when you find that you're drifting off quite a lot into reverie, into thought, where you're not being mindful of the thinking and you're not really fully mindful of whatever the activity is—whether in sitting with the body or the breath, or in walking.

I would really watch out for this more-or-less mindfulness. It's really apparent and obvious in the walking. Sometimes we're walking and we're kind of there, but meanwhile there's a whole story going on in our minds.

One way of bringing the attention back in a fully mindful way, as opposed to more or less mindful—for example in the walking—is to see the difference between being mindful of the movement, which is being mindful, you're there, but it's more on the surface experience of it. You take a step and you're aware of the

movement. The difference between that and taking the step and *feeling* the sensations involved in the movement—the pressure, the heaviness, the lightness.

When we were reporting to Sayadaw U Pandita, it was a very rigorous reporting form. We would have to go in and say, for example in the walking, "There was the lifting, I noted the lifting, this is what I experienced in the lifting—lightness, pressure, vibration. In the moving forward, noted it, this is what I felt." It was surprisingly demanding to actually be that connected to the feeling of what we were experiencing and to be able to name it. It required being really present, really attentive. Otherwise, we would know we were moving but would not know really the sensations in the movement.

So that's a way when you feel like you're in this more-or-less mindful state, the too-loose state—coming back, dropping back in to the sensation level—is very gathering of the attention.

At first, while we're still in this container of the silence of the retreat, you might devote some time in the walking just to investigate this level. In the beginning of the investigation, going slowly is really helpful because—okay, what is this? What am I actually feeling here?

But once you practice that a bit and you become familiar with the sensations being felt, then the mind can quite easily drop into that place at any speed, on retreat, off retreat. It's like we've just trained ourselves to be embodied in that full way. And then that becomes a tremendous aid to integrating mindfulness into our lives. Every time we take a step or are walking down the street or in our home, the mind—because of the training, because of the practice—automatically drops into that embodiment.

My voice feels shaky. I'm not used to speaking. So my question sort of relates to that and has two parts. The first is around effort. From my experience so far, it's not like I choose where my awareness lands. So when you talk about coming back to the breath, I'm not sure who the person is who is coming back to the breath. It's like awareness is sometimes on the breath and sometimes I suddenly realize I'm thinking, but I don't know where the volition is there—who's making that decision. It just sort of happens. So I don't know what the instruction is. What am I supposed to be doing?

I get the question. Who's doing anything?

That's my question. It's almost like I'm either going to be on the breath or not, but I don't know where the "me" is that's supposed to be doing anything.

Right. So, one: just forget the notion that there's a me there in the first place to do anything—which could be a whole five-hour dharma talk. But rather see that it's a process of different qualities of mind.

For example, out of just being mindful of what's arising in the moment—so there's no you choosing, mindfulness is arising because it's been cultivated—and then out of the mindfulness of what's happening in the moment, there may be the wisdom factor of mind, which sees clearly: "Oh, present. Not so present."

The wisdom factor of mind could then condition the volition. When wisdom is seeing that the mind is wandering, the wisdom can be the conditioning factor for intention: "Oh, be good to come back to the breath."

So there's no "I" necessarily in any of that. It's just the different factors of mind fulfilling their own function.

And if I could just ask one other thing related to that: I still get plagued, after practicing for some years now, by really gripping, intense mind states largely around fear and obsession. When I'm doing the practice, I can get to this place now where I can see aversion is present—largely, I'm scared of this feeling—but it's like I've forgotten what to do from there. When we see aversion or clinging, what's the instruction? Then what? I see it, but now what?

So two things come to mind. One is that the instruction is always very simple: be mindful of what's arising and don't cling. When you see the aversion, the resistance, then that becomes the object of mindfulness. It's almost as if the mind is saying, "Aversion feels like this." You're bringing a little bit of investigation to the experience of aversion, because that's what's arising in the moment.

But as you're doing that, with mindfulness and investigation, even using noting as a supporting tool—"aversion, aversion, aversion feels like this"—in all of those moments, there is no identification with the aversion. You're not strengthening the sense of self, thinking "I'm feeling really angry," because you're taking it as an object of mindfulness. You're taking that mind state as an object of awareness.

So basically, with anything that's arising, whether it's the initial object of contact with something or the reaction in the mind to that—there's pain, you feel the pain, then there's aversion to the pain—then you become mindful of the aversion. It's really the same practice. It's just staying present with what's arising in the mind and body in the unfolding sequence.

One way of doing this, or reminding yourself to do this, is to develop what I call the inner Dharma coach. We're actually coaching ourselves. For example, with fear—and I mentioned that I worked with that a lot earlier in my practice—I would coach myself when it came up really strong: "Okay, it's okay. Just be with it. Relax into it. Can I feel it? It's okay." It's just a reminder of the right attitude that we can bring to it. You can find your inner coach for whatever particular experiences you find difficult or problematic and bring up the coach of how to be with it.

A woman in the audience asked about noticing when the mind is too loose, when she's aware that she's also thinking at the same time. How do we work with that mind state?

Well, that's really what I've been talking about in terms of recognizing this quality of more or less mindful. Then it's just about directing attention—seeing that, which is good. You've become mindful. "Oh, it's like

this now." You recognize it. Then seeing that the more fully you can experience the body on the sensation level, that helps to really settle the mind in a deeper way.

For example, in the walking, as I described, dropping into the sensations of the movement. In the sitting, if you're working either with the whole body or the breathing, it's easier to be with the breath on different levels. It can be that more or less mindful level where we know we're breathing in, breathing out, and it's a little bit mechanical, even though there's some connection there. But that's very different than dropping into the breath.

And this is the art of the practice—still letting it be natural. There's often a tendency as we drop in to feel it more closely that we get involved in some manipulation of the breath. Just be watchful of that, and if it happens, notice it and remind yourself, "Okay, just sit with the whole body, let the breath find its own natural rhythm." And then, what are the actual sensations being felt? Whether it's the rising and falling or the in and out—the vibration, the softness, maybe the coolness or warmth as the breath comes in and leaves. It's that dropping into the sensation level which can help consolidate the mindfulness in the experience.

Someone asked about the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and its instructions around ardency—whether it relates to wise effort or the attitude of mind, and what the Buddha's definition might be versus what they called "the Hollywood version."

Well, they may not be so different. Different in the expression of them, but as a kind of mind-heart quality, I just see it as a wise passion for the Dharma. It's that enlivening quality, so that we're not just in this more or less mindful state or going through the motions somewhat mechanically, as the mind can drop to that level very often.

Ardency is really related to what Kamala talked about—saṃvega, that sense of spiritual urgency, the recognition of the depth and profundity of Dharma practice as being a path to real transformation of our consciousness. It's a path to liberation, so it's not a superficial undertaking. Sometimes it's just that contemplation or reflection upon the scope, the depth, and the vastness of Dharma practice.

Over the years, over these many years of practice and going through all the ups and downs that you go through in your own practice, what's sustained my practice is this interest in the nature of the mind, the nature of consciousness, the nature of our lives—how suffering is created, how we create suffering for ourselves, and how we can be free.

So all of that creates that feeling of ardency, of aliveness, of passion. The quality of the effort is very often conditioned by the attitude of mind. When we arouse this ardency or saṃvega, then that will be a support for finding the right balance of right effort. When we find that we're too loose, that ardency inspires us to adjust.

There's a Dharma equivalent to Carl Sagan's blue dot. From the astronomical point of view, just the mystery of this universe—I'm thinking of the Voyager spacecraft, eleven billion miles away, sending pictures back of Earth. It expands our sense of wonder and awe. We can also contemplate the vastness of the Dharma and the mystery of consciousness and awareness. It creates that same sense of awe at this whole process, and the blessing of finding some methodology for exploring it. Really, mindfulness is that methodology. This is the way of exploring every aspect of our mind and heart and body and experience. Sometimes just reflecting on that I find tremendously inspiring.

A practitioner raised a question about working with the breath as an object of attention, particularly as a singer who has a very instinctive physical response to control the breath rather than allowing its natural flow.

There are a couple of things to consider here. First, it is possible to become mindful of the controlled breath. You're attending to the breath and then you see that you're controlling it in some way. One thing to experiment with is simply becoming mindful that that's what's happening, rather than becoming aware of it and immediately going to the thought that it shouldn't be controlled. It would be interesting to see if by simply accepting the breath as it's manifesting in this controlled way—just noting "it's like this now, it's like this now"—whether with that attitude, it actually finds its natural rhythm.

You can also go to the whole body. That's why I like that frame: "There is a body." Because when the mind is not zeroing in on the breath but giving it a bigger frame, you're still breathing, hopefully, but there's a greater opportunity for the breath to find its natural rhythm. You're not attending to it in a narrowly focused way, but you're still aware of it within the context of the bigger frame. The mind is grounded in the bigger frame, and breathing is just one of the things happening within it.

I don't know how radios work, but going back to whenever you did dial on a radio, you turn the dial and it's static, static, static, and then it's receiving the signal in a clear way. There's that sense of receiving rather than going to. If you're grounded in the larger context—"there is a body"—that's your anchor. Within that, you're just receiving the input of the body breathing, but you're not going out to it. You're settled back, and the breath is simply an element arising within the bigger context that you're attuned to. In that way, it mitigates the tendency to control, because you're grounded in a bigger frame.

Another practitioner observed that they find it relatively straightforward to be equanimous with negative sensations, but with pleasurable sensations it's more difficult. The inclination is to lean into them and enjoy them. They don't feel like they're holding on or trying to prolong pleasurable experiences, but when they try to be equanimous during intensely pleasurable sensations, those sensations lose their pleasurable quality—in the same way that sitting with knee pain until it ceases to be painful. They weren't sure what the right approach was.

Well, that sounds like there's a little clinging in there.

But there's nothing wrong with experiencing pleasant sensations—part of that might be the enjoyment, the experience of the pleasure, of the pleasantness itself. Equanimity doesn't imply that you no longer experience the pleasantness of a pleasant feeling. The pleasant feeling is what's arising, and it has the characteristic of being pleasurable. One can be mindful of that and be fully experiencing it.

It's that last point you mentioned—can you sit back and just be in the full experience of it for as long as it lasts, but without that added impulse not to let go of it, without wanting it to continue? That's where the equanimity is. It's the spaciousness of mind where we're fully with whatever's arising, whether it's unpleasant or pleasant. But we're practicing not adding to the fullness of that experience the pushing away if it's unpleasant, or the wanting it to continue if it's pleasant.

So I would just be open to the experience of the pleasurable nature of it, but watch for the grabbing onto it or wanting it to continue. And if that's there, then that becomes the next object—the clinging, the wanting.

Just to remind you: see if you can keep in mind that little investigation of past and future, and how they're just thoughts in the moment. Because if you really see that clearly, it's liberating. It has a tremendous effect.

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