The Map of Wisdom, Part One

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:05:55

Some time ago, I was reflecting on some of the core aspects of the Buddhist teachings. Then in one sitting, somehow they just arranged themselves in a certain order. I was quite surprised by it—everything just fell into place in a certain way. I called this arrangement of teachings "the map of wisdom" because it brings together a variety of teachings, but as is remarkable about all the teachings of the Buddha, they mesh and fit together so beautifully as they express different aspects of the Dharma.

So this evening I'd like to talk about this map and how different essential teachings relate to each other. Some of these teachings will be obvious and just part of our everyday lived experience. And some will reflect more subtle aspects of the Dharma. This map of wisdom is going to unfold over two talks, so I'll go this evening and get as far as I can, then pick it up on Thursday and hopefully bring it to completion.

We'll begin with perhaps the most fundamental, foundational understanding of the Dharma—the foundational understanding of the whole journey. It was encapsulated in a short little dialogue that Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, had with one of his students. This is what his student said to him: "I've been listening to your lectures for years, but I still don't understand. Could you please put them in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?"

Suzuki replied, "Everything changes."

The implications of this very simple statement are enormous. In some way we can understand the whole of the Dharma as just an elaboration of this one teaching: everything changes.

Before exploring some of the profound implications of that statement, I'd like to talk a little about some of the ways that we experience change and impermanence in our lives. It can come from very obvious observations that are just part of our ordinary lives. These are experiences that we all have, but sometimes—and perhaps even often—we just don't pay attention to them in a deep way. We overlook them.

Just a few examples, and as I say, a lot of this is extremely obvious, revealing the truth of change. We see it very obviously in changes of nature: changes of weather, changes of season, and of course the rather catastrophic changes of our climate.

We see this truth of change in a particularly unique way in New England. Those of you who have been there, either at IMS or other areas of New England—it's quite remarkable that there are miles and miles of old stone walls through the woods. You walk through the forest and right in the middle of the forest there are these stone walls, and then stone foundations of old abandoned houses. It's not hard to imagine the

people who lived there, who built those walls and lived in those houses and had life experiences as vivid as our own. But walking through the woods now and seeing the remnants—where are they now? Where's all the activity of their lives now? Nothing remains. It's like a dream.

There are changes in society, the rise and fall of whole civilizations. Just recently I was listening to one of those Great Courses on Audible, and this particular course was fascinating to me. It was about the rise and fall of empires before Alexander the Great—3,000 years of history before Alexander. The whole course highlighted the rise of these empires: the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Hittites, Egypt, on and on. It was so interesting and so resonant in a way with what I sometimes feel is happening now with our own empire. These civilizations came into being, they flourished, they became powerful, they engaged in all kinds of activities—often with a lot of conflict and warfare—and then conditions changed and they disintegrated and disappeared and a new empire arose. This has been going on forever. It's the history of the human race.

There are changes in the experiences of our relationships, our work situations, changes in our bodies, changes in our minds. When we pay attention in any of these realms, from the very individual to the global, we see it's completely obvious that everything changes.

I want to mention a phrase which highlights this, one I came across as I was listening to the suttas, the Buddhist discourses.

They're all available on Audible now. We can listen to them as well as read them. And what I found is that often in listening, we take things in differently—at least I do—than when I'm reading.

So I was listening to this discourse, and there was one line which I must have read many, many times, but never with much impact. When I heard it, it really struck me. Something became so vivid when I heard this phrase, I think partly because it's a little unusual in English. It's not how we would usually phrase things.

It's very simple. The discourse was talking about how everything changes—*becoming otherwise*.

That was the phrase: becoming otherwise. Everything, all the time, in every moment, is becoming otherwise. For me, that phrase highlighted and made so vivid the essential instability of everything. Because everything is always becoming otherwise.

I really started applying it. I was on retreat as I was listening to these suttas, so I just started using the phrase in my own experience. I was doing walking meditation, and at a certain moment my knees started to hurt. Oh, becoming otherwise. Something broke in my house. Oh, becoming otherwise. It just highlights the fact that we cannot—it's impossible—to count on things staying the same, staying the way we want them to stay, because everything is always becoming otherwise.

That's just another way of tuning in to this statement of Suzuki Roshi, which has such profound

implications. We see it in science—the birth and death of stars and galaxies, and then the inconceivably rapid movement of subatomic particles. I was reading somewhere that some of these subatomic particles, their movement is measured in trillionths of a trillionth of a second. We can't even comprehend how quickly things are moving and changing on the most fundamental level of this physical material world. And we think things are so solid and stable and fixed, but they're not.

Obviously our ordinary perception is probably not picking things up on the level of trillionths of a trillionth of a second. But what we do find in our practice, through the gradual cultivation and strengthening of mindfulness and concentration, is that what seems so solid and fixed and singular is really changing and moving all the time. What we think is a solid, singular experience is not just one thing—it's made up of a flow of many changes.

We can see this very simply, even within a breath or a step. Conventionally, we might say, "Yes, there's a breath," as if the breath is a single thing, or "a step." But as we're paying attention, we see that within a breath there are innumerable sensations, vibrations, fluctuations in temperature. Or in a step, the many sensations of movement. Or we hear the sound of a bell. It's not one thing. When we're really listening to the sound, there are so many different vibrations and changes of pitch.

I'd like to do a little experiment with all of you which will illustrate an important point, revealing the importance of seeing things in this way. Just notice how your hands are resting right now. They're probably touching something—either resting on one another or on your lap or your legs. Now, pretend you've never meditated before. I'm asking the non-meditator you: what are you experiencing?

The non-meditating you would probably answer, "I feel my hands resting together." That would be the conventional, ordinary answer. But we don't feel our hands resting together. There is no sensation called "hand." We don't feel hand. We feel certain sensations, and then we overlay a concept on those sensations. We create the concept, which is a kind of thought, and we call it "hand" or "hands." And because we have not yet begun our meditation career, we think that's what we're feeling—that there's something called a hand that we're feeling—not realizing that it's a concept.

Now, you might well be wondering, so what? What's important about all this?

Well, it's of tremendous significance in terms of this meditative journey. For the simple reason that the concept doesn't change. Hand today, hand yesterday, hand tomorrow. So as long as we're perceiving or being with our experience in terms of the concepts we have about them, we are not tuning in to the experience of the momentary flow of changes that is always going on.

And so we begin to get a very fixed notion of reality—that there are these solid things, more or less unchanging, even though over time we might acknowledge that the hands grow old. But as long as we're at the conceptual level, we are not deepening our understanding. We're not refining our perception of change.

It's very interesting to notice in our lives that we are mostly living in the world of concept. And that's why a meditation retreat, where we drop down from that level to the level of direct experience, is so valuable. So now, if you really feel your hands resting on one another, be your meditative self. What am I feeling? Pressure, warmth, tingling, whatever. Those are the actual sensations being felt, and they are in continuous change. It's by dropping into this level that we really begin to refine our understanding of this fundamental insight into the changing nature of everything.

This is a big step in our meditative journey—when we go from a simple awareness of what is happening to an awareness of the changing process of what's happening. It's almost as if we go from the content level to the process level, of things continually becoming otherwise. And we need to see this again and again, more and more deeply.

There was a very famous Burmese monk who lived around the end of the 1800s, beginning of the 1900s. His name was Ledi Sayadaw. He was a great scholar and a very realized being. This is what he said: "Not seeing arising and passing away of phenomena is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening."

I hope you see how this really highlights the importance of this shift—dropping in or dropping down from the level of our concepts about things to the direct experience of seeing the continual arising and passing of things becoming otherwise all the time. That's the doorway to all the stages of insight and to all the different levels of awakening.

So how does this happen? How does seeing impermanence lead to these insights? What are the insights that actually come from seeing things change, from seeing directly and with refinement the nature of change?

Well, one of the insights that itself has tremendous implications for how we live is this: through seeing change, things always becoming otherwise, we begin to experience very directly the basic, ultimately unsatisfying, unfulfilling nature of conditioned experience. Conditioned experience means everything that arises because of conditions—and it changes.

To say that we begin to get insight into the ultimately unsatisfying or unfulfilling nature of our conditioned existence does not mean that we don't experience all kinds of happiness and pleasures, which we do. That's part of our lives. Rather, it's the understanding that no matter how pleasant something is, or how much happiness or joy we experience in the moment from it, conditioned experience can never provide a lasting happiness precisely because it doesn't last.

And it just seems so obvious. How many beautiful or wonderful experiences have you had in your lives? Countless. We're fortunate, mostly. We have so many beautiful experiences. But where are they now?

What's so amazing about the seductive power of the world—and I find this so striking—is that when we look back at our lives, the ephemeral nature of all that we've experienced, the dreamlike nature of it all,

seems so clear. We look back at all the things that have happened and it's like remembering a dream. And yet when we look ahead, we keep getting enticed by all the experiences to come, forgetting that they will also soon be past. When we look back, we understand it very clearly.

And as soon as we look ahead, we completely forget it. This is so much a part of our lives—looking forward, leaning forward, anticipating the next hit of experience. It could be the next event in our lives, the next day of work, the next project, the next vacation. Here it might be the next meal, or the next breath. We're always leaning into the next as if the next whatever will finally fulfill us. But of course, because of this great truth of change, of things becoming otherwise, it's incapable of providing that lasting fulfillment because it soon passes into the dreamlike state of the past.

And as many of you will know, although not all of you, the older we get, it all seems to be flying by ever more quickly. Somebody once made the comment—I read this someplace—that when you turn fifty-five or sixty or sixty-five, breakfast seems to come every fifteen minutes. It is really like that. The sense of time as we get older really speeds up.

When we truly and deeply see the truth of change—and this is what our practice is, this is really what we are learning from being mindful of the various aspects of our experience—it's not only what it is that's happening, but by repeated mindfulness of it all, we see directly. It's not some theory, and it's not what somebody is just saying. We see for ourselves the continually changing nature of everything. And in seeing that, we deepen our understanding that attachment to what in its nature changes is the cause of suffering.

One meditator came into an interview and was describing this experience. He said, "Just this understanding is like rope burn." You know what rope burn is? If you're trying to hold onto a rope and it's being pulled through your hand, the tighter you hold on, you're going to get rope burn. We're living in a state of rope burn to the degree that we're attached—really to anything. Because everything is in a state of change. Everything is impermanent. This is one of the key understandings of the Buddha's teaching: that attachment or clinging to that which is impermanent is a fundamental cause of suffering in our lives.

It's not hard, I think, to understand this intellectually. But our practice is to make it vivid in our lived experience, so we actually begin to feel the rope burn in our lives when we're holding on, when we're grasping, when we're clinging. We can see this so clearly with our changing minds and bodies, or the minds and bodies of others. If we're attached to this body or anybody's body staying a certain way, it's not good news, because it doesn't stay a certain way. It always changes through aging, through illness, through accidents—always continual change.

Now, it's quite different and sometimes difficult to realize that all these changes in our lives, which are always going on, really in every moment—they're not a mistake. It's not that we're doing something wrong. It is the very nature of this mind and body. This is what the Buddha was just pointing to and reminding us and urging us to look at and to see and to take in. Everything changes. Everything is

continually becoming otherwise. And this is what happens to everyone, to everything.

There's one simple teaching of the Buddha which expresses this very succinctly. When you read the discourses, as the stories go, many people got enlightened just hearing it. Ready? This could be the moment. But you really have to take it in—not here, you have to take it in here. He said, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." So simple. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Of course, I had read this thousands of times, and in reading it, I always understood it. Or rather, in reading it I would be taking it in on a kind of conceptual, intellectual level, just acknowledging the obviousness of it. Yeah, everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away. Then a few years ago, I was on a self-retreat. I was just sitting and meditating, and this line came to my mind. It was very interesting because I wasn't reading it and I wasn't even listening.

It just arose in my mind in the midst of a meditation. So it landed, or perhaps more accurately, it arose from within the very process itself. If you can get a sense of what I mean—it wasn't a concept out there somewhere, but right in this process of being with the flow of my experience, almost enmeshed in that flow, this line came: *Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.*

And then my mind did something that had a profound impact on me and my practice. *Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.*

This arose particularly in the context of the meditative experience. Because whatever we might want is also going to pass away. And just when that understanding arose—*oh, therefore there's nothing to want*—I could feel my mind drop back from a wanting, a leaning into the next moment, that I wasn't even aware of.

This is a tendency that is very common in meditation practice, so I want to highlight it: the energetics of leaning into the next moment. We're pretty present. We're there with what's arising. But we're there either in order for something else to happen, or in anticipation of something else happening. There's that leaning, an element of wanting in it, although it can be very subtle.

Let me give an example that you might be able to relate to. One of our contemporary teachers, the Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, often urges people in their practice to be checking the attitude in their minds. So it's not only being mindful of what is arising, but also looking: what's the attitude towards it? How are we relating to it? "Check the attitude" became like a little mantra.

One time—a different occasion than the first story—I was just sitting and feeling my breath. It was a completely ordinary sitting. Nothing special was going on. It wasn't particularly difficult, wasn't particularly profound. I was just sitting, feeling my breath. And then Sayadaw U Tejaniya's remark came to my mind: *Oh, check the attitude.* So I just asked in my mind, "Well, what's the attitude in my mind now?"

And it was so interesting, because something happened. It didn't even require an answer. The simple

asking of the question was enough for my mind to settle back from a wanting that I had not even seen was there. And it was very subtle when I reflected on it. As I was feeling the breath, there was just some—maybe a wanting of calm, or a wanting of more concentration, something. And in the asking of the question, "What's the attitude?"—just the question itself—I felt my mind relax back into that place of non-craving, non-wanting.

This goes back to the earlier story: *Therefore, there's nothing to want.* Because in our meditation, whatever it is that we're leaning into will be just another passing experience.

And this is the key point. If you don't get anything else from this retreat, I hope you get this: the whole point of the practice is not about some new experience. It's about not craving. That's really what we're practicing. But I know for myself, and in fifty years of teaching, it's just so common that we engage in our practice with different kinds of wantings. And they're wantings for good things—that's not the issue. Wanting concentration, or wanting the *bojjhaṅga*, the factors of enlightenment that Dara spoke of the other night. But all of that is in the service of the mind of non-craving, because that's where the freedom is.

This is what's contained in the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths. There's the truth of dukkha—suffering or unsatisfactoriness, which I'm going to delve into a little more. And then there's the cause of dukkha.

What did the Buddha say? The second noble truth: the cause of suffering or of dukkha is craving. The third noble truth, which expresses the experience of the liberated mind, is the end of craving. And the fourth noble truth, of course, is the Noble Eightfold Path, the path of practice.

Are you getting a sense of what I'm trying to convey? This all ties together. It's through the seeing of impermanence—things continually becoming otherwise—that we see that clinging or wanting or craving is the cause of suffering. And our practice of being mindful of what's arising, being mindful and experiencing directly the truth of its continually changing nature—that's what leads to the mind relaxing back from wanting. And so we actually get a taste, even for a moment, of the third noble truth. We get a genuine taste of freedom in every moment when we drop back from the wanting, drop back from the craving.

It's very interesting. This is what happened when I reflected on that line: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, therefore there's nothing to want." I could feel my mind for those few moments not wanting. And then it was kind of looking at or experiencing the nature of the not-wanting mind. It was a very vivid experience—might have been for just a few moments—but a very vivid experience of peace, of freedom, the mind free of craving.

I am emphasizing this to the extent that I am so you have as deep an understanding as possible of the whole point of what we're doing. It's so easy to get caught up in the ups and downs and the stories and

whatever's happening in our meditation. We can forget why we're doing it. That's why this practice is so profound. It's not about just creating some wonderful experience, even a wonderful meditative experience. It's about freeing the mind. And we free the mind through letting go of craving, of clinging, of attachment. That's really what's being practiced through all of the various tools and methods and suggestions we might have.

The more we open to the truth of change, the more we open to it and experience it on a moment-to-moment level, our minds and our hearts relax and we really let go in our lives of so many causes of distress and suffering. So the first thing we learn through seeing impermanence is the ultimately unsatisfying nature of conditioned phenomena. As I say, it can be satisfying in the moment and for a period of time, but it's not ultimately satisfying because it doesn't last. And so the Buddha called this insight into the unsatisfying nature—the inherently unsatisfying nature—he called this the truth of dukkha, the first noble truth.

Now, dukkha is a Pali word, as most of you are familiar with. It has a very interesting etymology, which I think really conveys in some way our experience of dukkha in our lives—not the big dramatic, massive suffering, but even just in the ordinary course of our lives. This is the etymology of the word dukkha: It's said that the *kha* of dukkha, at least in one meaning, is the axle hole of a wheel—you know, the hole where the axle goes in. And *du*, as in dukkha, means hard or difficult. So when we are clinging or attached to that which in its nature is changing, the axle is not fitting correctly into the center hole of the wheel. Therefore we get a very bumpy ride in our lives because it's not fitting well. We're not in harmony with the truth of how things are. I find that a very clear image, a way of understanding what dukkha really means. When we're not in sync, when we're not in harmony, it's a bumpy ride.

So the second important implication of impermanence—the first one is seeing the ultimately unsatisfying nature of conditioned impermanent phenomena—the second, perhaps less obvious implication of this very basic truth in which Suzuki Roshi summarized all of Buddhism, "everything changes," is seeing more and more clearly the empty nature of phenomena.

I'd like to talk a little bit about this because just the word *empty* in English—people sometimes wonder, what does that mean exactly? The emptiness of things. One of the meanings is insubstantial. I'll give a couple of examples. Think of a time when you went to a really good movie, back in the day when we could go to the movies—absorbed in the story, caught up in all the action, feeling all the attendant emotions, being absorbed in the story. That's a common experience, and it's why we go to the movies, because we want that experience. But what's really happening? Is there anybody really getting chased or falling in love or dying, all the things that we think are happening and are responding to as if they're really happening? But they're not happening at all. Really all that's happening is changing pixels of light on the screen. Because we're not seeing that—we wouldn't probably pay ten dollars just to see changing pixels. So that's an example of basically the emptiness of that phenomenon. What we think is there is not really there. We're in the illusion that's being created.

This is not to suggest that we don't engage with the stories, the dramas of our lives and of our ordinary conventional perceptions—because we do. We're living in the story of our lives in terms of relationships and just how we see the world. We've created a whole story that we live in. So it's not to suggest we don't engage in that, because we do, and we need to in a certain way.

But if we can also see on a deeper level, seeing the more elemental changing nature of whatever it is that we're engaged in, we don't fall so easily into patterns of clinging and attachment. Because on the story level, it's very easy to get attached and cling to what we like and enjoy, and try to push away and have aversion to what we don't like and don't want. On the ordinary conventional level of our lives, we're continually being buffeted by wanting and aversion, by clinging and aversion.

Even as we're engaged in the story of our lives and all the dramas of our lives, if at the same time we have some understanding, some really direct experience of the deeper, more fundamental level of change—the changing elements—then we can engage in the world, engage with other people, and engage in our stories, but we have a certain wisdom about it all. We see on a fundamental level the essential emptiness of it all. Then we engage without so much attachment, without so much clinging and craving, and our lives become much more easeful. We have a lot more happiness in our lives.

This insight into the insubstantiality of phenomena leads to an understanding of what in many Buddhist traditions are called the two truths, or the two levels of truth—that is, the relative level and the more ultimate level.

I'll give you an example. If you take any ordinary object, like a glass, we can have the glass and appreciate it, understand the design of it and the use of it. We do use it; we drink water out of it. So there's the reality of the glass. At the same time, if we looked at that glass through a high-power microscope—which, by the way, I've never done—we wouldn't see glass at all. We would see a whole different level of reality. There's no glass on the level of subatomic particles or atoms. On that level, glass doesn't even exist. And yet in our ordinary, conventional level of reality, it does exist and we use it.

When we can begin to see the more ultimate level of the insubstantial nature, it allows us to engage on the relative conventional level where we are mostly living our lives. But because of the wisdom we have of the more ultimate level, we don't get so caught. We don't get so conditioned by the clinging and grasping and attachment. And so our lives become much more easeful.

Another way of understanding our practice, besides the largest context of understanding that what we're really practicing is non-craving, is that we learn how to integrate these two levels of relative conventional ordinary reality and the deeper understanding of the more ultimate reality.

Using the example of the glass—it's one thing. It's not that ultimate reality is over here and relative reality is over there. It's the same thing, but seen from different levels, seen from different perspectives. There's a unity to it. In our practice, we want to engage the mindfulness with seeing both the conventional level of

the body—taking care of the body and just our ordinary way of being with it—and at the same time, understanding the more ultimate level where, just as there's no glass, there's really no body on that level. It's just the elements. In Buddhism, the elements are talked about traditionally as earth, air, fire, and water, but it's really just the sensation level of experience.

There are a few expressions which convey the union of these two levels. One was from a Korean Zen master, Seung Sahn. He founded the Providence Zen Center and has many branch monasteries around the world. He died some years ago. He had a wonderful phrase. He said, "There's no right and no wrong"—that's the ultimate level. On the ultimate level of momentary change, of subatomic particles, there's no right and no wrong. "But right is right and wrong is wrong"—that's how we have to live. Both understandings. There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong. We don't want to forget either side of that.

Another expression of this same union is from the very famous Tibetan master, Padmasambhava—the being who brought Buddhism to Tibet, a great adept, a great enlightened being. He said, "Though my vision of emptiness, the ultimate level, is as vast as the sky, my attention to the law of karma—that is, action and result—is as fine as a grain of barley flour."

And you see, it's the same thing. On the level of emptiness, the mind is vast. And yet within that vastness, we need to be paying careful attention to our actions. There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong. This understanding leads us to take great care with the actions we engage in.

So here an important question arises: How do we go from a conceptual, intellectual understanding of all this—of these insights—to a daily lived experience of them? Because that's what is truly transformative. We can comprehend many of these teachings on an intellectual level. They're profound and they can have some impact on us. But the real transformation comes when we actually begin to live the insights, to see them very directly in our own experience. It's not just what the Buddha is saying or somebody else is saying—it becomes our own direct knowing.

Understanding this impermanent, insubstantial nature of phenomena is only half the story. The other half, which is of tremendous importance in our lives in terms of creating well-being and happiness for ourselves and others, has to do with one meaning of the word Dharma, or Dhamma in Pali. As you know, it's a Pali word with many meanings, so it's good to get some sense of what's included in this one term, because it is just so profound. When we say what are we practicing, we're practicing the Dharma. So what does that mean?

As I said, Dharma has many meanings. It can mean the truth, the law, the way things are, the nature of things, or just nature itself. It can refer to the teachings of the Buddha. Dharma is also the word used to describe all the individual elements of mind and body—they're all dharmas. So you see, it has very broad meaning.

In this unfolding map of wisdom, I want to emphasize one particular meaning of the word Dharma: the understanding of Dharma as lawfulness. Things are not happening accidentally. Everything is happening lawfully, according to different laws of nature. Things happen when certain conditions come together for them to happen. And if those conditions are not there, it's not going to happen.

We can see this very clearly in the physical world. The laws of science have described in increasingly accurate and refined ways how material phenomena come into being and change, the laws governing the unfolding of material phenomenon. These are the laws of biology, chemistry, physics, neuroscience. In science, I think, it's very easy to understand and connect with the lawfulness of nature. Things just don't happen randomly.

One example that might bring together some of the various things we've talked about so far: just think of a rainbow appearing in the sky. After some storm, a rainbow may appear. For most of us, I think it just brings a smile—there's a certain delight and joy in seeing the beauty of the rainbow. And then it slowly fades.

So what has actually happened? There was a physical process of some changing elements—air and moisture and light coming together in a certain way to create the appearance of a rainbow. It's a lawful occurrence. Given those conditions, a rainbow will appear.

But a couple of things to highlight about this process. One is that the conditions creating the rainbow were not always there. As the conditions came together at a certain point, the rainbow appeared. And then when the conditions change, the rainbow disappears. Right here, in this simple example—and everything is revealing this—it shows us the truth of changing conditions, changing the way we're experiencing the world. And then with even more attentiveness, more careful attention or inquiry or investigation, we begin to understand that there...

We really begin to understand that there is no thing in itself which is a rainbow. A rainbow is simply an appearance arising out of certain conditions coming together. But it's not as if the rainbow is a thing in itself. Is this clear? It seems fairly obvious.

The import of this, which I'll go into more detail next time—in Buddhism, there's a lot of talk about non-self and selflessness. Impermanence is pretty easy to understand, at least conceptually, even if we need practice to really see it directly, moment to moment. And dukkha is certainly easy to understand. But selflessness or non-self—that's not so obvious. People often have a lot of questions about what it means.

Somebody once asked a Tibetan teacher, "Is the self real? It feels real." I was going to paraphrase his response, but I think I'll just read what he said. To the question "Is the self real?" he responded: "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 exaggerate."

So in that respect, we're all like rainbows. The rainbow is real, but it's not *really* real. And it's just that

understanding of rainbow which we can apply to this whole mind-body process that we call self, that we call "I." Self is a designation, like rainbow. It's a designation for this constellation of changing mind-body experiences. But just like rainbow is not a thing in and of itself, simply a designation for an appearance, self is a designation for an appearance—the pattern of our mind-body elements coming together in certain ways.

So this could be a good place to end part one. Next time, we'll see where all of this is leading. Hopefully this has created some of the foundational understandings of what our practice is really all about, the nature of insight, and the possibility of freedom.

Let's just sit for a moment or two. Please enjoy your rainbow-like nature.

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