Sunday's Dedicated Questions & Responses with Joseph

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:29:48

Well, hello, everyone.

I think before we begin the Q&R, why don't you just sit for about ten minutes. I won't be guiding this—just as a way of settling into the space, into ourselves.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes mindfully. Mindfully seeing.

So I'm supposing that you sent in a few questions. Hopefully Ileana has picked the easy ones. Whenever you're ready, you can read them.

One question asks: Is intensive jhana practice necessary for awakening on the path? What do we do if we can't afford to step away for months and years on retreat to cultivate jhana?

Jhana is not necessary. For those of you who may not be familiar with that term, it refers to deep states of concentration where the mind becomes absorbed in the object. It's mentioned often in the discourses, but there's also a teaching from the Buddha that talks about people who have walked the whole path to liberation without having developed jhana. So while it can be a big help, it is not necessary.

One image might give you some idea of how it works. My teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, would say that if we have that level of concentration, if we've developed jhana, it's like being able to cross a river or a big lake in a motorboat. It makes it a lot easier. Without jhana, it's like rowing across. Clearly that level of concentration can be a great help, but for some people—either because of the particular conditioning of their minds or the circumstances of their lives—it may take longer to build the motorboat than to row across.

I think that's good to keep in mind. If it's possible and the circumstances allow and the mind has that capacity, it's a good thing to do. But if not, it's not necessary, because the Vipassana practice itself develops enough concentration for awakening, for the experience of nibbana.

Another question: I was reading books by Jiddu Krishnamurti, and he talks about the rejection of authority, the need to question everything, and that truth cannot be organized. To what extent is this to be understood? How far can we rely on a teacher and teachings?

Well, of course, if one follows that advice, one is relying on him as a teacher. So it's a kind of ironic statement. However, it points to something that I think is really important, and one of the things that

attracted me and many others to the teachings of the Buddha. In this way of understanding, there's no call for blind belief or blind faith in anything.

The Buddha characterized the Dharma and practice in a very wonderful little phrase. He said often, "Come and see. Come and test it for yourself." He very explicitly said, in a famous sutta to a group of people called the Kalamas—it's called the Kalama Sutta—he basically said, don't believe anything. Don't take anything on faith. Rather, hear the teachings, whatever they may be and from whomever, put them into practice, and then see for yourselves whether it reduces—and in the end uproots—those qualities of mind that cause suffering, like greed and hatred and delusion.

It's only when we've tested it for ourselves and see for ourselves that this works—even if we have not accomplished the final goal—but from the very beginning, we can see: Is this really helping? Is it helping me become more wakeful, more aware, less attached, less fearful? Is it developing wholesome states?

In that sense, that advice is quite good. We want to take responsibility for assessing whether a particular practice and a particular teaching is serving that end. As many of you probably know, the Buddha often summarized what he taught in a simple phrase. He said he teaches only suffering and the end of suffering. It's not about ascribing to certain metaphysical beliefs or certain dogmas. It really is very pragmatic: Is the teaching, and is our implementation of the teaching, reducing suffering in our lives? We are the ones who can assess that.

That openness to investigation—not just believing something as dogma, but asking, "Is this working?"—I think that's what's very inviting about these teachings for many people.

Another question asks, "In the past few months, I'm experiencing doubt in my practice. I continue to sit daily and study Dharma, but I question the practice and wonder why I persevere. I also often feel low energy and continue with the practice because I hope it's just a difficult phase. Please give suggestions for getting out of this slump."

Well, there are a few levels to that. One is that doubt, as many of you know, is one of the five hindrances that the Buddha highlighted as being obstructions to the practice. And in some way, doubt is the most challenging because with all the other hindrances—desire and aversion and sleepiness, restlessness—we are in the arena or the ballpark of our chosen object. We may not be relating to it skillfully. In other words, we may be relating with desire or aversion or restlessness, but we're in the ballpark.

When the mind is filled with doubt, then we really have removed ourselves even from the arena of practice, and we're just caught up in the thought loops of whatever that doubting mind is, however it's expressing itself. And it can express itself in many ways—thoughts of "I can't do this," or "this isn't the right time," or "do these teachings really work?" There are many different manifestations of doubt. So when we're caught by that doubting mind, we're not at all in relationship to whatever the actual present moment is. And that's why it's particularly challenging.

At the same time, doubt, like all the other hindrances, is very workable. And the way of working with it is to see how quickly you can recognize both the particular form the doubt is taking for you. You want to look carefully enough at what your mind is doing, almost to be able to write down the sentences that are in the mind. It might be self-doubt, it might be doubt about the teachers, it might be doubt about the teachings—whatever the doubt is, get very precise in how it's arising in the mind. Because from that precision, when we're aware enough and mindful enough of the form it's taking, then it becomes easier to become aware of it just as it arises. And that's the key to freeing ourselves from being caught.

So you're sitting and you're feeling the breath and whatever else is going on, and one of these doubting thoughts comes. As soon as you recognize it, make a mental note. That becomes the object of your mindfulness. So: doubting mind, doubting, doubting, doubting. And to remind you of something I mentioned yesterday or the day before, particularly watch the tone of voice of the note. If you're noting "doubting" but there's a lot of aversion to it, that will be reflected in how you're noting. So the key then is simply to soften the tone of voice of the note.

We're simply acknowledging, "Oh, doubting mind has arisen." That doubting mind is not I, it's not self, it's not mine. It's just a conditioned pattern of thought that functions as a hindrance. But if we see it and we can be mindful of it—and careful noting here is really helpful—in that moment of noting, we're not caught up in it. We're not identified with it. And so it simply becomes another passing thought, and we just continue with our practice.

So the first response to that question is to really give some emphasis to understanding, to catching or becoming mindful of the doubting mind as close to the beginning of it as possible. And that will free the mind from the deleterious effect of doubt when we're caught in it.

The Buddha had a very striking image for the effect of doubt on the mind. He called it the thorny mind, because it's like a thorn that keeps jabbing the mind, irritating the mind. And when doubt is strong and it's not addressed in this mindful way, it becomes a real obstacle in the practice. It can really stop our practice. But making it the object of mindfulness, it just becomes something else to note and to notice and to let go of. So that's the basic framework for working with doubt.

But then how do we work with those times that may have given rise to the doubt appearing in the first place? It might be times of low energy. It might be times when we feel nothing much is happening—you know, "I've been sitting and walking, and..."

A few things in that regard. I'll share with you something that goes back many years when I was practicing in India. I'd been practicing for quite a while, and at a certain point, for months really, my practice just felt like an indulgence. It felt like it wasn't going anyplace. So there was that doubt, you know—okay, what's going on here?

And then I realized, I talked to myself a little bit and I said, "Joseph, your job is just to sit and walk. Sit and

walk, sit and walk, sit and walk. Do the practice. Let the Dharma take care of the rest. Surrender to the unfolding."

And that really helped me a lot because then it took me out of that thorny mind of doubt and just inspired me to persevere—to keep doing the practice, understanding that the Dharma itself will go through its various phases. At a certain point, we will begin to feel either more energy or some more momentum. So that's something to keep in mind: we do our part and then surrender to the Dharma.

There are a few other possibilities here. As you can tell from my response, your question reflects what almost every meditator will go through at different times. This is a common experience that we need to learn to work with.

One time when I was practicing in Burma, the conditions were not very good—the physical conditions. At a certain point, my mind was complaining a lot, which was its own kind of doubt about what I was doing there and what was going on, because the conditions were so challenging and difficult. I go in to see my teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, and I tell him that the conditions are not good, the food wasn't good, and this and that. All he said to me was, "Be more mindful."

The thought in my mind when he said that was, "Thanks a lot." I've come all the way to Burma and practicing, and the conditions weren't that great, and he's saying simply be more mindful. But he was my teacher and a really great teacher. So I leave the interview and I go outside, I'm doing walking, and I thought, "Well, I'll try it."

I became more mindful in the walking. I actually brought my attention in closer to the feeling of the sensation—of the walking, of the step, of the movement. And it was amazing because as soon as I brought my mind down right into the experience in a very careful way—and it wasn't forcing, it wasn't over-efforting, it was just feeling it very intimately, feeling the sensations of a step, the movement, the touch.

This is not complicated, and we don't have to have any kind of fantastic concentration to do this. It really has to do with what I mentioned the other day: refining the habit of the quality of our attention. When our attention is more casual—what I often call the state of "more or less mindful"—this could be in the sitting or the walking, where we're kind of there but not really fully there. Especially in a situation like you asked about, when it doesn't feel like much is happening and there's low energy—that's exactly the time to bring the attention in very close.

Again, it's a feeling of it closely and intimately. It's not over-efforting to do it. It's settling back into it. As soon as you drop into that level of attention, I think you will feel your practice getting energized. At a certain point—it may take some time—a kind of momentum builds up and more energy comes.

So it's all of these things. It's recognizing doubt, noting it, persevering, just doing your job, letting the Dharma take care of the rest. And then also noticing the quality of your attention and bringing it closer to

whatever the object is. The situation is definitely workable, and I would encourage you to really play with this.

Next question: How can you discern the difference between delusional justification and wise understanding of a greedy or deceptive action that you believe will not bring harm to oneself or others?

I wish I could ask a question back to the question. Why don't you read it again, and I'll see if something lands for me.

The question is repeated: How can you discern the difference between delusional justification and wise understanding of a greedy or deceptive action that you believe will not bring harm to oneself or others?

Well, I think the answer was contained right within the question. If one recognizes that it is a greedy action—so if there's enough mindfulness to see, "Oh yes, this is just an expression of greed"—already that is indicating that a rationale for doing it because it doesn't harm oneself or other is already deluded. Because greed is harmful; it's certainly harmful for our own minds and very likely harmful for other beings.

Our whole practice is to uproot the causes of suffering—to really see through and uproot those qualities of mind, those factors of mind. These are the ones that the Buddha, in Buddhist terminology, called the unwholesome mind states: greed, hatred, delusion, grasping, cruelty.

There's a list of unwholesome mind states. And when we pay attention, when those mind states are arising, we will see that it is a state of contraction. It's a state of suffering.

So one experiment you can make, which will illustrate this—and as I say, this is not something you have to believe; you want to investigate this for yourself. But it's very interesting when we're sitting, could be sitting or walking, but sometimes it's clearer in the sitting. So we're sitting and just feeling the breath, feeling the body, and then maybe some greedy fantasy arises in the mind. Maybe it's a lustful fantasy, a sexual fantasy, a food fantasy—whatever is really grabbing us and filling us with greed for it.

Now, what's interesting in my experience is that sometimes we're seduced by the pleasantness of imagining what it would be like in that experience. And so that's the hook for us. We're anticipating some pleasure. We get caught up, and most of us at different times have gotten caught up in many different kinds of fantasies.

What's really interesting is that at some point you're sitting and getting caught up in whatever the fantasy is, even thinking at the time, "Oh, I'm really enjoying this." But then watch what happens. We're there, lost in it, lost and lost and lost. And then it goes away because it will. Everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away. Everything is impermanent in that way.

What I have experienced over and over again—no matter how seductive the fantasy was, which is really just a manifestation of the mind of greed, a wanting—no matter how seductive the fantasy was, when it

goes, when it disappears, I've always experienced that as a kind of relief and release. It's like the mind has been let out of the grip of something and we're abiding then in a state, a space of much greater openness, freedom, ease.

By seeing that again and again and again, we're not so fooled by that rationale, which really is a deluded rationale: "Oh, this is not harming myself, it's not harming others, it's okay." Because it is harming us. In a very basic way, it's creating a certain environment in our minds that is grasping, is attached, is contracted. And we can see that clearly in the moment when it goes away. Right in that transition, we can feel a sense of relief, release.

The same thing applies to a mind state of anger. The Buddha had a wonderful description for anger because sometimes we are seduced for one reason or another by that mindset and we feel, "Well, I should be angry," for whatever the circumstance may be, not realizing that in that anger, we are suffering. The Buddha described this as anger with its poisoned source, poisoned root and honeyed tip. That's a really powerful image for me because it acknowledges that yes, the tip is honey and it's seductive and we justify it to ourselves. But the root, the source, is a source of suffering. And we can see that, we can really feel it.

So I think that as soon as you recognize that the mind states are unwholesome—of greed or anger, whatever it may be—then it's to realize that our rationale or justification for acting on it really is coming out of the deluded mind.

This is not to suggest that just by hearing this or even understanding it, all of a sudden we're going to never act on these unwholesome mind states, because unfortunately we do, out of long-established habit. But the more we see, the more clearly we see, we begin to do it less and less and less because we're actually happier and more at peace not acting on those mind states. And again, this is something to check out for yourself—not to believe it because I'm saying it or maybe because it's in the texts. Really investigate and see what your experience of these mind states is.

All right. This next question is a little on the longer side:

"I have a desire to reconcile my practice of the Dharma with a sense of ambition for my life, to achieve and to become successful professionally, relationally, and monetarily. This means living up to my potential, being admired and valued for my positive contributions, to create pleasant experiences for others. Many motivational speakers talk about getting really clear about what you want as the first step to actually getting what you want. I get started on this path in regards to success and I quickly run out of steam when I try to reconcile this with my practice. This makes me feel stuck and like I'm not leading an integrated life as a householder practitioner. Please help."

Yeah, so fortunately, I don't think this is really a problem. I think it's more a linguistic problem. In English, the word "desire" can mean many different things and we use it in different ways. Sometimes we use the word desire and desire

It means it's expressive of a quality of greed and attachment and clinging and grasping. In that case, it is an unwholesome mind state. But desire can also be used differently—"I have a desire to be of service in the world," or "I have a desire to be successful." And the whole list of desires mentioned in the question, all of those mentioned seem totally fine and reasonable to me. They are valued—society values of how to live a full and engaged life.

So when we use the word desire in this way—"I have a desire to be respected by my peers or my family," or "I have a desire to contribute, to develop myself professionally"—whatever it may be, I think the key is to investigate. It's not about not having a desire for those things, because this is the use of the word desire in a very different way than the meaning of desire as greed.

The word I like better to express this is the word aspiration. We have an aspiration for certain things. Even those two words have very different flavors and connotations as we use them in English. Desire can easily slide into that sense of unwholesome desire, whereas for me, when I think of aspiration, that feels like a wholesome move towards something of value. I would encourage you to really investigate what those aspirations are and whether they are of value for you and for the world, for the people around you. If you feel that they are, then the aspiration for them and the working to develop them seems totally fine to me.

When the Buddha taught to lay people—and it's quite different from when he was teaching monastics, where there was a whole different level of renunciation involved—he had many lay disciples, many of whom reached various stages of enlightenment. But when speaking to lay people, he referred to and acknowledged the value of worldly success, of taking care of oneself in the world in a wholesome way.

So I don't really see any conflict at all. I think it's more that we can sometimes confuse one of the connotations of desire with this more wholesome move towards accomplishing our goals. It would be interesting to really consider what your goals are, but I imagine that for the most part they hold wanting to create happiness for yourself and others, to be of service in the world. Those seem like all really good things.

Another question asks, "Can you elaborate on how equanimity differs from apathy? I've been practicing treating the cup as if it's already broken, but it feels like day-to-day decisions matter less if it's all going to change anyway. How can we move forward in making decisions?"

I think the key is that in the practice of equanimity and using the example of the cup already broken, it really has to do with freeing ourselves from attachment to the cup. It doesn't mean that we don't appreciate the cup or enjoy it. Maybe it's a beautiful cup. Maybe it works really well to serve its function, keeps our coffee really warm or whatever. We can appreciate the cup and use it and be delighted if it's a particularly beautiful cup. But our understanding, when the wisdom mind comes in, we realize it's already broken at some point. And so we use it, we appreciate it, we enjoy it, but without attachment.

When conditions do change—and we've been very involved and engaged in various smaller and bigger decisions of our lives—we really do participate fully in what's happening, but we do it with the wisdom of understanding that things are always becoming otherwise. Being attached to things staying a certain way is going to be the cause of suffering.

So apathy is not caring about things. Equanimity is not being attached to them. That's quite different, because we can be in a very caring mode and a very engaged mode and still be living the wisdom of understanding the changing, impermanent nature of things. Then we are holding on less, and the less we hold on, the less we grasp, the less we suffer when things do change—as they will.

Another question: "Often in sitting meditation, I get a sensation of energy at the top of my head or centered between my eyes, which might persist for the entire session. Do I just touch it as I might a pain and continue with awareness of other sensations as they arise?"

I would experiment a little bit. Different teachers will have different approaches to this, so you can really try some different methods. One of my teachers for a while was Goenkaji, and he had a particular practice method—basically body scanning. But at certain points in the practice, he would say to keep your attention at that sensation at the top of the head. It's almost like—I don't know—in some traditions they might call it a chakra. We don't use that term very much in this tradition, but there are definitely different energy centers in the body that become very apparent at different times. In working with him, he would say that you can spend some time just resting in that sensation and staying there.

Not for a whole sitting, but more than just a few moments. Or sometimes he would say, well, just rest in the sensation at the heart center. So that's one approach, and you could do that for a little while and see what happens.

Other approaches would be, if it's calling your attention, to simply be with it for some time but not necessarily as long. You're with it, you feel it, and then you come back to just the mindfulness of the flow of changing objects, whatever they may be. There's no hard and fast rule for this, and I would experiment.

One thing to keep an eye out for is this: if you do spend a little more time at any one of these energy centers, really pay attention to the quality of balance in the mind and in the body. Sometimes people might do that and find that the whole energy system is getting tighter, or the mind is getting disturbed in one way or another. The key is to really be watching what happens as you're staying at those particular centers. If it feels like it's getting out of balance, or contracted in some way, or intensifying too much, then I would back off from that and open up to other sensations in the body, the breath, whatever's happening in the mind. But there's room for a little exploration of this.

Another question asks, how do we work with the resentment that comes up when we give to people who habitually take more than they give back?

I think this has to do with the fact that the resentment is coming from an expectation when we're giving.

In such a situation, if we're moved to give something, it would be very interesting to watch and see whether there is some kind of expectation of one thing or another. If there is, then the giving is still good, but it's a little bit diminished—the spirit of generosity is somewhat diminished by the expectation of something in return. If there's no expectation, then I think the feeling of resentment would not arise.

In the situation described, maybe it would result in you not being inspired to give to that person again. Or maybe not, maybe it would be fine. But given the fact that you felt some resentment arising, it might well be that you're not inspired to give to that same person. I think the important thing for us as givers, when we are giving something, is to really see what our motivation actually is in that moment.

I'll share one story with you. This goes back to my early days in India when I was practicing. Those of you who've been to India know that one of the realities of living there is that there are a lot of beggars on the streets, often young kids. They're all around, and we have to learn in one way or another how to relate to this experience.

One time, in between retreats, I was down in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, and I went into the village, to the bazaar, just buying some fruit. A little beggar boy came up with his hand out, and just without thinking, very spontaneously, I gave him an orange. It was not some huge act of generosity—it was just something quite spontaneous in the moment.

But then something really interesting happened. I gave him the orange, and he simply walked away without the slightest acknowledgment. I certainly was not expecting effusive thanks for the orange. But when he walked away without any acknowledgment—not a smile, not a nod of the head, nothing—I realized there was an underground expectation that I had not even been aware of until he left without responding in any way.

That was really interesting to me, and it started to interest me more in really looking and seeing: when I'm giving something, just to be open to what our motivation is in that moment. Is it just metta or compassion, friendliness? Is there some even mild or subtle agenda? To really look at this, to take interest in this—not to have a judgment, but just to see. Can we uncover more and more subtle levels of what's going on in our hearts and minds?

There's a line by the poet W.H. Auden which I really love, and which suggests a very forgiving quality toward ourselves and others. I don't know whether this line was in a poem or just some writing, but he said, "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart."

It's just the acknowledgment that unless we're saints, our motives very often will be mixed. Sometimes not—sometimes they may be really pure in the moment—but it's not surprising if we find mixed motives. The key here is to see them. It's not to judge, it's not to think we're terrible people because there was a mixed motive. But the more we see it, that is the process of purifying.

So that's what I would suggest in that giving—regardless of how it's received, our job is to be seeing what's

going on in our own hearts. And each of these exchanges provides a really good opportunity. Sometimes we'll feel resentment, or we'll come to understand that we were expecting something back, and sometimes not. But all of this really is tremendously illuminating.

Another question says, "I am a beginner and I am old. I was feeling inspired by the practice of mindfulness, but getting a glimpse into the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and the lists within lists is overwhelming. I should have started this path fifty years ago, and I may never get beyond the practices of mindfulness and metta. It will have to be enough, but please, can you offer any advice?"

Yes. Mindfulness and metta is enough.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha about an elderly man who wanted to become a monk. In the monastic order, there were hundreds of rules—216 monastic rules. And this elderly man said to the Buddha, "I can't even remember all those rules. It's going to be impossible for me to follow them all." And the Buddha said, "Can you remember one rule?" And the man said, "Yes, I can follow one rule." And the Buddha said, "Be mindful."

So don't underestimate the value and the power of mindfulness, because mindfulness brings along all the other wholesome qualities. There are a group of mental states called the factors of enlightenment—qualities like investigation and energy and rapture, calm, concentration, equanimity. These are the qualities that, when developed and brought into balance, provide the ground for awakening, for enlightenment. And it's said that mindfulness, which is listed first, when we practice it, brings all the others along and develops all the others as well.

So I think you can really have confidence in your practice, wherever you're starting from. Mindfulness and metta will carry you a long way along the path.

And I don't know your belief system regarding next lives and future lives. But within the Buddhist context, of course, that is part of the teaching. And so no matter when we start our practice, we are cultivating the field of wholesome mind states which, if that's true—and the Buddha talked a lot about it—will carry over from life to life and carry us along the path. But it certainly will bear fruit in this very life, just those two qualities you mentioned. So I think you can really have confidence in that.

Another question: "How can we know if we are ready for a longer retreat?"

I think that if you have the interest in doing it, you're ready. Because a longer retreat is really no different than a one-day retreat. It's the same kind of experience. It's only over many days. So if you've done a daylong or a weekend or a few-day retreat and you feel inspired, interested in doing a longer one, the interest itself, I think, is an indication that you're ready. And I would go for it.

I think it's appreciating, given the state of the world and just how turbulent things are—I have this very strong, one might call it a bias, that when conditions allow for us to do more practice, and that involves

the resources to do it, the opportunity to do it, the time to do it, all the supporting conditions—if they're all there and the interest is there, I would definitely go for it, because we just don't know when these opportunities will arise again. And it's such a precious opportunity.

I first got into meditation when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I was right out of college, young, twenty-one years old, in Asia for the first time. It was my first connection with the Buddhist teachings. Some of the monks were leading these discussion groups, and I had studied philosophy in college, so I was asking so many questions. People were getting really annoyed with me. Finally, one of the monks said, "Joseph, why don't you try meditating?"

So I was young, I was new, this was all really new to me. I got my paraphernalia together, got all set up, set my alarm clock for five minutes because I didn't want to sit too long. But what was amazing—something really happened in that five minutes. And it wasn't a great enlightenment experience. It was simply the understanding, in that first five minutes, that there was a way to look into the mind and understand it, as well as looking out through it.

Most of our lives, we're just looking outwards, dealing and engaging with the external world. But to come into contact with a practice that provides a methodology for looking inward and really understanding our hearts and minds, seeing what's going on, understanding the causes of different kinds of suffering in our lives, and recognizing the potentials within the heart and mind for more peace and more compassion and more love—just understanding that there is this way, and there is a well-trodden path.

These are teachings that have been practiced for thousands of years and passed down to us. I feel this tremendous gratitude for having come into contact with these teachings, and then really taking the opportunity whenever it presents itself to ask: Can I deepen this? Can I develop it? It's just very rare and very precious.

And especially now, with this whole aging process—I'm sure most of you, many of you have felt this as well—time is speeding by. So when there is a chance, I would say go for it, if that interest and motivation is there.

Does noting pleasant and unpleasant sensations reinforce our craving and aversion to them? And how do we work with them when and if they do?

This goes back to the tone of voice of the note. If there's something pleasant and you're noting it with a quality of "pleasant, pleasant, pleasant," just sinking into the pleasure of it, then you're simply reinforcing attachment to it. Whereas if the note is really equanimous, just a simple acknowledgment—"oh, pleasant, pleasant"—we're experiencing it. It's not separating us from the experience of pleasantness, but the note in an equanimous tone, a soft tone, can really guide the mind into a relationship towards what's pleasant and unpleasant without feeding the tendency for attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. Because that's what we're trying to decondition.

Those reactions of the mind are so habitual. And I think I mentioned last night, it just seems so normal. Of course I want what's pleasant. Of course I don't want what's unpleasant. But there's another whole level of understanding, of relating, where we see that yes, our life is made up of this continuum, this changing process—pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant. If we're not reactive, not trying to hold on, not trying to push away the unpleasant, we don't keep ourselves in a state of turmoil. It may be subtle, it may not be some big struggle, but if we're really paying attention to our mind, we'll see that the mind is not at peace when it's filled with attachment and aversion.

The noting of pleasant and unpleasant is a way of aligning our awareness and attention with these universal aspects of experience—the feeling tone, pleasant or unpleasant, that arises in every moment. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is happening all the time, and mostly we're caught in the habit of our conditioning. The meditation gives us at first glimpses, and then more stability, in being able to be with pleasant, be with unpleasant, without the mind being affected by that. We're experiencing it—it's not that we're oblivious—but we're not reactive. We're simply open. The mind is impartial. And the experience of that is one of much greater peace. We're really at ease, not buffeted by the storms of pleasant and unpleasant, liking and disliking. So the noting, when it's done properly, can be a really big help with this.

I am interested in committing more deeply to the Dharma. Most teachers say that you don't need to go to India or Burma or Thailand to learn the way, and yet most of them did go there and studied with Southeast Asian teachers. Is there really no difference between studying and practicing the Dharma in the West versus in its birthplace?

There are some differences. There are positive and negative sides to both. Practicing in Asia, although it's getting increasingly difficult just because of political conditions—Burma is not an easy place to be these days—but when conditions allow for it, it is quite inspiring to be immersed in a Buddhist culture where the whole society values the practice. That's really inspiring and energizing.

On the other side, conditions can be difficult: health-wise, the food. There are a lot of conditions that are much more conducive to practice here in the West. So there are advantages to both.

I would say it's certainly not necessary to go to Asia. First, many Asian teachers come and teach in the West, so in that sense you get the best of both. And there are many experienced Western teachers who have spent a lot of time practicing, probably in Asia when there were not as many opportunities here in the West. That was certainly true of my generation of teachers.

So there was not much happening here when I first went to Thailand and to India. The opportunity to practice and to go deep in the practice is certainly available here now, and people have done that. It was one of the inspirations here at IMS for creating the Forest Refuge, which, as some of you may know, is a facility different from the retreat center where people can come for long-term practice. It's really not set up as a course model. There's some teacher support, but there's a lot of self-directed practice along with

that support. We've had people come and spend many months, a year, and one couple actually spent almost four years there practicing. So there are opportunities here to really immerse oneself in the same way that one might have done in Asia.

How important is an intellectual understanding of the Dharma? Is it enough to just know the basics of vipassanā and vedanā that we have been taught here in this retreat and then just work with our meditation?

This will depend somewhat on each person's interest in further study along with the practice. Practicing what's being taught here certainly provides the basics for continuing. As one of my first teachers said, the practice is simple—it's not easy, but it's simple. So it's not hard to understand, and I think you probably have a sense of that already. The actual instructions in meditation and the guidance you can receive are pretty straightforward.

However, for those who have even some interest in the study aspect, it can be really helpful because it enlarges our understanding of what the Buddha taught, and the Dhamma is vast. Even though the path of practice is very straightforward, having a conceptual framework for understanding the mind and body can be both interesting and helpful for our practice. We learn things beyond what may be just our own personal experience. In practice, for example, we each have our own particular path and kinds of experiences that happen, but that's still a very limited part of everything the Buddha taught and what's possible.

I've found that study in different ways can be enormously helpful. Sometimes we may be reading a book—it might be the actual teachings of the Buddha, reading the discourses, or it might be books from more contemporary teachers discussing the teachings. Very often, while reading or studying, maybe there'll be just one line or one phrase that resonates with something in my own experience and unlocks something, or something gets clarified that I might not have thought of by myself. So I would say some amount of exploration on the study side can be really helpful and interesting. But how much you do really depends on your own particular interest.

The other part of the question: When do we know that we are ready to advance our practice to the next level? Also, what is the next level after we are able to concentrate well on our breath?

The title of my first book was *The Experience of Insight*, and the subtitle was *A Natural Unfolding*. That subtitle really expresses how the practice unfolds—it unfolds naturally. In some ways, and this may sound a little contrary to what I just said, knowing too much about the different levels and stages of practice can be a big hindrance, because then the mind can get filled with expectation and wanting and frustration. Things often proceed much more organically and easefully when we don't know about all that, when we're just doing the practice and letting it unfold as it does.

This is one of the things I so appreciate about this particular form of meditation—it's very organic. By

basically following these simple instructions, using the breath as the primary object, the anchor, and then opening up to whatever else may be arising—first bodily sensations, then what arises in the mind, thoughts or emotions or images—we're cultivating that strong mindfulness of what is arising moment to moment. And then we're emphasizing or noticing the fact that it's all changing. It's just this, as I mentioned, empty phenomena rolling on. We're simply in that flow of change. And simply by being in that flow, that will take us through all the various levels and stages. I think it's most valuable to really trust that—to trust that it will all happen and unfold naturally.

It is helpful from time to time, while on retreat, to receive guidance from a teacher. There are different ways the mind can get caught or hooked or entangled in something that we might not see ourselves—this doesn't have so much to do with levels of practice, but with those particular moments of stuckness. In that respect, a teacher's guidance can be really helpful. It's really just a matter of unhooking from whatever we may be attached to or pushing away. That kind of guidance is valuable. But if we continue the practice, it will unfold. That's the beauty of it.

Someone asks whether I could draw comparisons between Vipassana and Zen, or perhaps between Theravada and Mahayana. The question of how different Buddhist traditions relate to one another was of great interest to me because I practiced in several different traditions. Sometimes it can seem like they're at odds with one another because they do emphasize different things. There are different methodologies and even different metaphysical understandings. For a while, I was really confused because truly great teachers in different traditions would sometimes be saying opposite things. And there I was, trying to make sense of it all—well, the Burmese teachers say this, the Tibetan teachers say that, the Zen teachers something else. Who's right? For a while, I was driving myself crazy with that question because it was really tormenting me.

But then at a certain point, there was a kind of revelation. I realized I was asking the wrong question. It's not a question about who's right. It was about seeing all the different teachings as skillful means. Instead of thinking that the teachings are statements of some absolute truth—oh, it's this way or it's that way—I began to see the teachings from different traditions all as skillful means. And then the question became: skillful means for what?

As I explored and investigated, I saw what was common to all the traditions. Whether it's Theravada or Zen or Mahayana or Vajrayana, all the traditions agree that the mind of freedom is the mind that is free from any clinging to "I" or "mine." If a practice results in liberation from clinging—and this is a phrase the Buddha used often in the texts, "liberation through non-clinging"—it is pointing to non-clinging to anything as being "I" or "mine."

This gets into the depths of the practice and what we learn from what seems like a very prosaic exercise of just being with different phenomena and seeing their changing nature. The deeper we experience or open to the rapidity of change, that's what deconditions the clinging. We can't hold on. Things are changing so

quickly. It's like water over a waterfall.

I saw and realized, both from study and from practice in different traditions, that the essence underneath the metaphysics and even underneath the different methodologies is that they're all serving this aim of non-clinging. This became a very freeing way for me of relating to the different traditions. Any practice that we're engaged in, whether this one or any other, I think that would be the question to ask: Is this practice freeing the mind from clinging? Because that is the essence of the free mind—not clinging to anything as "I" or "mine." We open up to this really profound understanding of selflessness, emptiness of self. The different Buddhist traditions certainly approach this from different sides and different angles, but that is the essence.

Another question asks about the fact that the Buddha abandoned his wife, son, and parents, and how this can be reconciled with his teaching. That question comes up frequently. I think it has to be held in the context of the whole Buddhist cosmology of many lives and the aspiration to become a Buddha. This is all what's told in the texts and different teachings. I have no way of confirming this for myself, so I'm simply relaying how it's understood.

Given that the Buddha's enlightenment was a process that happened over innumerable lifetimes, the people around him over all these many lifetimes were very connected from life to life in many ways. Often the people closest to him were those who had made aspirations—to become the wife of the being who would become the Buddha, or to become the son, and so forth. So it's all part of a much bigger tapestry. In the last life, it was simply living out the final culmination of the Buddha's coming to awakening. The understanding is that all of the beings close to him were, in that bigger picture, in a supportive relationship to that unfolding. And in fact, the Buddha came back and shared the teachings with his wife and his son, and they became fully enlightened as well. So it has to be seen in that very large context.

Another question says: A few years ago, I was practicing meditation very consistently and noticing major improvements in wise action, speech, and concentration. During COVID, I lost this consistency and old negative habits of mind and body began to resurface. As I restart my practice, I find myself regretting the loss of continuity and judging myself for how I have digressed. What can I do to get past this state of remorse and reignite a continuous practice?

Let me share a sad story with you.

I had been in India practicing for quite a few years. My practice was going really well. At a certain point, the concentration was good, and the experience was one of feeling my whole body like a body of light. It just felt wonderful, really quite blissful. Every time I sat down, that's what it would be like.

Then I had to come back to the States to make some money so I could return to India. When I went back, I had completely lost this body of light. It felt like I had a body of twisted steel. I spent the next two years in

just the way you described—wondering what I had done, caught in a lot of self-judgment, feeling what I had lost. I spent two years struggling with this idea of how I could get it back. It was terrible. It was the worst two years of my practice.

Until I realized that I had just been carrying a corpse around of these past experiences. What I needed to do, instead of struggling with all the feelings about it being lost and the struggle that came from that—it's amazing it took me two years to understand this—was simply to come back and basically be with what was happening now, to go forward rather than looking back with regret or remorse or self-judgment, which is totally useless and doesn't serve any purpose at all. It just agitates the mind.

There are a lot of things at different times and different conditions where we may have been going along quite smoothly, and then there's just a big disruption of one kind or another for whatever reason. When we finally come back to a place of being present and seeing what's going on, we just start right where we are and open to whatever our experience is in this moment. Maybe we don't have the same level of concentration that we did before—for now—or other things are not as settled. It doesn't matter.

I'm going to share a phrase with you which is very awkward English, but it's to this point. It relates to the teaching of the Buddha where it's said: liberation through non-clinging. It doesn't matter to what you don't cling. If you realize that the essence of the practice is non-clinging, then we can practice not clinging with whatever's arising. It's not clinging to good concentration. It's not clinging to bad concentration. Whatever it is that's arising, it's just another arising experience. Can we be with it? Can we be mindful without holding on, without pushing away, without greed, without aversion? Then we're right back on the path.

As you mentioned in the question, and as I've experienced, and as everybody else really has, we just go through different cycles—times of great ease and times of great challenge, for whatever reason. COVID was a big factor in many people's lives in recent years. But whenever we come back to a commitment to the practice, we just start right where we are. We can practice with depth regardless of the level of ease if we realize it's not to cling to whatever it is. Then our practice continues to unfold.

That's what happened with me. After two years of that struggle and self-judgment, it didn't go back to exactly as it was, but the practice continued to unfold. It gave me a lot of confidence in that. It just took me that much time to learn. I would hope it doesn't take you two years to get back in the flow of being with whatever experience is arising, just as it is, and practicing in the way that you've been doing over these past few days.

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