Monday's Questions & Responses

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 31:10

I'm open now for some questions, and I see Carlita is here, ready to ask them.

Yes, indeed. Good to see you again, Joseph.

Good to see you, Sangha.

We have many questions that have come in. Thank you so much to each of you who have been bringing those in. Since this is our last day of formal practice, I did want to bring in some of those that have to do with continuing the momentum.

One of the questions that came in is: How important or critical is it to sit in formal meditation every day? Is four or five days out of the week enough? And if so, is there a set period of time that you'd recommend—a minimum of twenty minutes or more? Any guidance on that would be dearly appreciated.

Well, as a general principle, the more the better, because it will keep the momentum of the practice going. But as a general guideline, I think it is really helpful to have a commitment to sitting every day. One also does not need to become obsessive about it. If there are some days when, for whatever reason, it just proves too difficult, there's no need to be judging oneself for that. Just pick it up on the next day.

But I find having a regular daily practice essential. It's really important for myself, even after all these years, because it's a way of disengaging from the entanglements and the busyness of our lives and really refreshing ourselves, refreshing our whole energy system through the daily sit.

One suggestion for people who may be finding it difficult: somebody once offered an idea which I found really helpful. This is for an extreme case of finding it difficult. They found that what helped them was to make the commitment to at least get into the meditation posture each day. Anybody could do that no matter how busy we are. The commitment is just to get into the meditation posture. And what they found was that once in the posture, it wasn't that difficult to sit for some period of time. The difficulty was more in the disengagement from the busyness of our lives.

So again, have a general aspiration to sit every day, and find a time—generally the same time every day is helpful because then we get into that habit of it. But if we happen to miss that time, of course it can be helpful to sit at any other time in the day. And if it's super difficult, just get into the posture and then see what happens. At least in that way, you're fulfilling your commitment. The regularity of practice is really important.

How long? You have to see for yourself, really. If it's possible to sit for an hour a day, that's great—or even longer. Some people make a commitment to sit an hour in the morning, an hour in the evening. That probably for many people might be more challenging. If you find that an hour is just beyond what you can do at this time in terms of a regular practice, see what makes sense for you. I think it would be good to at least try to sit for half an hour at a time, kind of as a minimum base.

These are just some general guidelines. I would really encourage you to try to establish a daily sitting practice. It is just super important and will make your life a bit more easeful.

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Joseph. Another question that came in had to do with the refuges and precepts. We've been chanting those refuges and precepts each morning, and the question is: What do you think about reciting the refuges and precepts in English? Would that detract at all from the meaning and the practice of doing so? Is there an advantage, perhaps, in doing it in the original versus in one's native language, whether it's English or something else?

I would say to just experiment and see what is the most meaningful for you. It might be different for different people. Some people chanting the Pali might feel some kind of energetic connection through the ancient Pali language, realizing that this has been chanted for thousands of years. For some people that can be really meaningful. For other people, if they do it in English, they may feel like they're connecting more deeply with the meaning of the refuge. Really either way is fine. See what feels most meaningful to you. And you could experiment—sometimes perhaps do it in Pali, sometimes in English.

Yeah, there's no hard and fast rule for that. It's really about seeing what moves one the most.

Another question came in, and it's quite a large one: How do you understand enlightenment, and how important is it?

I'm going to give a Joseph definition and a more classical definition. I may have mentioned this in an earlier session, but one of my favorite understandings of enlightenment these days is simply *lightening up*. We're in a process of lightening up, which really means lightening up from our deeply ingrained self-referential habits. We're cultivating a kind of selflessness in this process—not taking our minds and our experiences quite so seriously. And again, as I've mentioned before, in meditation I've found for myself that having a certain sense of humor about what's going on in my mind is really helpful. That is a way of lightening up a little bit. So that's kind of a Josephism.

More classically, enlightenment really means the weakening and final uprooting of all those mind states and mental factors which are the cause of suffering. The Buddha framed this in a really simple way. He said the roots of all unwholesome mind states are greed, hatred, and delusion. So the process of enlightenment is accomplished through the very practice we're doing—by becoming mindful of what's arising and not holding on, seeing the impermanent nature of it all. As we weaken these forces of greed, hatred, and delusion in the mind, we suffer less.

At different stages in our practice—and there are levels called the stages of enlightenment—this happens for most people not all at once but progressively over time. At different levels, different defilements are uprooted. I think it's really helpful not to think of enlightenment as some kind of esoteric abstract notion. It really has to do with suffering or freedom from suffering in our own minds. And that's what becomes a great motivation for us—both to free ourselves and then, as best we can, to share our understanding with other people. So for me, enlightenment is a very meaningful aspiration because it can be related to the immediacy of our own experience.

Another question came in that kind of touches into that, perhaps getting more into the *how* of it. The question is about feeling like with practicing mindfulness, we want to prevent difficult emotions from arising.

I would frame it a little differently in terms of the unfolding of the path. Rather than being attached to the idea that we want to prevent difficult emotions from arising, I think it's more helpful to frame our practice as being open to a way of relating to them so that we're not identified with them when they arise. Because different emotions are going to come, and unpleasant emotions that cause suffering will arise to some extent or another until we're fully enlightened—until all the unwholesome roots are uprooted from our mind stream. For most of us, that'll be a little way off anyway. We can expect these emotions to arise at different times due to the different circumstances and conditions of our lives.

The key for our practice is: can we relate to them in a way that doesn't cause us as much suffering? This has to do with how we're relating to them. For example, if anger arises, which is an unpleasant emotion, and we're caught in the story of it, there's a lot of suffering. But if we are mindful of the anger and exploring the experience of the energy of anger—taking interest in that particular experience with mindfulness, being with it without identifying with it as being I or mine, seeing it as an impersonal arising appearance due to certain conditions—then our relationship to it has really changed, and we become much more easeful.

There's one image which is a little unusual, but it's striking. It's a paraphrase from a Tibetan text talking about how thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds in the sky. Can we be with them and really be resting in the awareness of the sky, seeing these as just appearances coming and going in that space? What happens is that we *root* the clouds through identifying with them, claiming them to be *m y* anger or *I'm* angry. But the *my* or the *I* is extra.

The image is a little bit amusing. When we are identified with an emotion like that, it's like having a root come down from the cloud to the earth. Of course, that's a ridiculous image, but that's what we're doing when we are identified with these difficult emotions. It's not the emotion itself that's the real problem—as I say, they are going to arise until our minds are completely purified. But we can learn how to relate to them in an increasingly freer way. It's okay to feel them if we're mindful, if we're not caught up in them.

And here, the noting is a real help, and particularly the quality of interest. So just for myself, over all these

years, I've learned—it's a phrase I use these days—not to waste my suffering. Meaning when the mind is upset in one way or another, it piques my interest. It's like, okay, something's going on in my mind that's causing distress of one kind or another. Can I investigate? Can I take interest in what's going on in the mind that's creating that suffering? And there is something, some way we're relating that is not skillful. So that interest really is a very freeing attitude, because when we're interested, we're no longer caught or identified with it.

One of the very first connections I had with the understandings of wisdom from the East happened when I was in college. I didn't know anything about Buddhism, but I was taking a course in Eastern philosophy and we were reading the Bhagavad Gita, which is this great Hindu text. And one line just jumped out at me. Again, I was young, I didn't know anything about any of this, but for some reason this one line resonated. And it's really the essence also of the Buddhist teachings. The line said, "Act without attachment to the fruit of the action." Act without attachment to the result.

So it doesn't mean that we don't have aspirations and we don't have goals, because we can. But can we realize that a lot of conditions are outside of our control? We can devote a lot of energy and effort to our aspiration, realizing that the outcome will be what it is. And if we can let go of our attachment to the outcome—which doesn't mean not having an aspiration for it, it just means realizing that we are not in complete control of how things unfold—there's a lot of freedom in that. There's a freedom, and it actually frees up a lot of energy that may have been bound up in attachment to having the goal be realized. That energy we can use in the pursuit of the aspiration. And we're doing it then in a much freer mind space. It makes our mind, I think, more creative and more flexible as a particular path for whatever it is that we're aspiring to unfolds.

So I think that's really the key. The problem is not having aspirations, because we all do. I mean, it's the reason we do things, right? Because we'd like to see some kind of outcome. But can we hold it more lightly? Still with the energy to achieve it, but not with that attachment—or I might say obsessive attachment—to the result. And for me, that has just been very, very freeing.

Just one more thing on this. I'll relate it actually to our meditation practice, because we can have the aspiration for awakening, for enlightenment. We can have the highest aspiration. But if we have expectation—which is another word for attachment—if we have an expectation in each of our sittings for the sitting to be a certain way, it's a lot of suffering. Because as I'm sure you've all realized by now, the dharma has a life of its own in our sitting experience, many ups and downs, and they will not always fit our expectation of what we'd like the next sitting to be. So we still have the aspiration, which sets the direction for where we're going. And then we stay free in our experience of how that particular pursuit unfolds for us. This is true both in meditation practice and also in our more worldly aspirations.

Now, on the relationship between equanimity and dispassion: I think if we are in a dispassionate state, the mind will naturally be in that quality of equanimity and impartiality because it's not being conditioned by

attachment or by aversion. But it's important to understand from a Buddhist perspective what dispassion means, because in English we may have all kinds of connotations with that word—of meaning not caring or perhaps indifference. And that's not really what dispassion means in the Buddhist sense.

It means being free from the craving of greed, of clinging, of grasping. There's a coolness in dispassion that is still very connected with our experience, but connected in a very open and impartial way. As I mentioned in my talk on equanimity, be watchful that you don't infer from these words some sense of disengagement, because it's not that. We are fully there and fully with each experience, just not being reactive to what's arising. And I think that's really the meaning of dispassion—it is the quality of equanimity.

We've had a number of questions come in regarding no-self. One of these questions reads: "Would you please elaborate on no-self? It's here that my practice comes to a screeching halt. It seems self-focused to use habits of mind to shift hindrances. The hindrances are appearing to 'me' and affect 'my' experience. Where is the no-self in this?"

This could definitely be at least an hour talk, and then maybe many, many more hours. But I'll just highlight a few things. Even in the way the question was asked, the "I" in the mind was extra. Hindrances are arising. There can be the experience of the hindrance, the knowing of anger, the knowing of desire. Claiming either the knowing or the particular hindrance as "I" or "mine" is a whole extra process. We can be in the experience free of that identification with it.

Then the question arises, "Well, I'm the one who's seeing that it's a hindrance and wanting to remove them." Again, the "I" is extra, because we could understand it as the wisdom factor of mind understanding that the hindrances are unwholesome and the cause of suffering. We could say it's the wisdom which leads to the decision to do a kind of practice that will minimize or weaken the force of the hindrances. So we can begin to see it all as an impersonal process—just the working out of different mind states and different mental factors, each serving their own function.

One way of encapsulating this in language might be to say: it's the thought that is the thinker. It's not that the thought belongs to me; the thought itself is arising out of different conditions, and the thought is the thinker. We could say that it's anger that angers, it's love that loves, it's fear that fears. Each of these qualities and aspects of experience manifests in its own way, having its own effect, but we have been strongly conditioned to identify with each of these. That's where the creation of the felt sense of self comes about. It's not that there is a self there in the first place. There are just all of these impersonal sensations of the body, thoughts and emotions of the mind, all manifesting their own nature. And then there's another mental process—which is also impersonal—but that process identifies with what's happening. In that process of identification, there is that felt sense of self. So that's one frame for understanding.

Another frame for understanding selflessness points to an important aspect of this discussion. It's an example I've used very often. Think of a rainbow. There's a rainstorm, and then after the rain, the sun

might come out, and sometimes we see this beautiful rainbow in the sky. We all enjoy it. We usually take delight in that experience—it's beautiful. But with some interest, we could ask the question: what actually is a rainbow? We see that a rainbow is an appearance that arises when certain conditions of air and light and moisture come together in a certain way. There are these elements of experience, elements of nature coming together, and when they come together, a rainbow appears. But there's no thing in and of itself which is a rainbow, independent of those conditions. Rainbow is an appearance coming out of the conditions.

So we could say that self is like the rainbow. It's not something that exists in and of itself, but there is an appearance when certain conditions of mind and body come together.

So this is summed up beautifully by another Tibetan teacher. Somebody was asking basically this question: Is the self real? And this teacher had a great response. He said, "Yes, it is real." And that's like saying yes, we all have the experience of the rainbow. The rainbow is real in that sense. So he said, "Yes, the self is real, but it's not *really* real."

I think that points to what we could call the relative truth—the relative experience of the self as a conventional designation for all of these conditions coming together. But when we investigate what that designation refers to, rather than just getting attached to the designation itself, when we start to investigate—okay, self is a designation for a combination of different mind-body elements, all of which are in constant change and flow and flux—that's when we begin to experience the three characteristics and the empty nature, the empty-of-self nature, of all this phenomena.

But still on the relative level, the conventional level, we use the word self, and we often have some experience, some felt sense of it. So it's real in that sense, but it's not really real. And we can discover the "not really real" part through the investigation that we've been doing.

I think that may be a good note to end on, because that really gets to the heart of what our practice is about. Referring back again to the question of enlightenment and awakening and the path and daily practice, it's summed up in one teaching of the Buddha where he said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Whoever has heard this has heard all of the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all of the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings."

So everything we do—all the various methods and techniques and suggestions—are really in the service of this very profound understanding of the nature of our minds and bodies, of who we are. Nothing whatsoever. Not in the mind, not in the body, not externally, not internally. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Everything is simply what it is, and the "I" and "mine" is extra.

Whoever has practiced this and realized this has realized all the teachings. And this is what makes this practice so liberating.

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