Working with Thoughts and Emotions

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:02:54

Today I'd like to talk about two of the most predominant and far-reaching aspects of our experience—aspects that condition both our suffering and our happiness, and that play out both in our meditation practice and in our lives. These are the realms of thought and emotion.

In order to have a fuller understanding of how to work with these forces in the mind, it's helpful to place them in the framework of two overarching principles in the Buddhist teachings. These are the principles of relative truth and more ultimate truth. We can understand these two levels in terms of karma and emptiness, or of content and process. We can look at thoughts and emotions from each of these perspectives, understanding that each perspective helps to balance the other.

It's important to consider both of these levels, the relative and the more ultimate, because one of the dangers in spiritual practice and in meditation practice is becoming attached to or overemphasizing one side or the other. As you probably are familiar with, we can easily become immersed in and attached to the content of our stories, the movies of our minds. But we can also become attached to the idea of emptiness, leading to what is sometimes called spiritual bypassing, where we dismiss whatever's arising as simply being empty, and so don't pay attention to things when they need attention being paid to them.

The Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim had a wonderful little phrase describing the balance of these two, the relative and the more ultimate. He said, "There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." On the level of no right, no wrong, it's all empty phenomena. And at the same time, even as we understand things being empty of substantial existence, inherent existence, still right is right and wrong is wrong. This is our challenge: to really integrate these two levels of understanding.

The importance of working with thoughts and emotions is highlighted in many different ways in the teachings. Some texts describe the mind as tumbling like a waterfall. And there's a verse in the Dhammapada, which is a collection of Buddhist verses. As you listen to this—this was said 2,600 years ago—see if it still resonates with you today. This is one of the verses: "The active mind is difficult to tame, flighty and wandering wherever it will. Taming it is essential, leading to the joy of well-being."

Does anyone notice their flighty mind wandering where it will? I love this because it just points to the universality of these teachings. What was true 2,600 years ago is still true of our minds today. And we know this from our own experience, particularly in meditation. I'm sure you've noticed how the mind can hop on a train of association. A thought arises, we hop on this train of association, we don't know that we've hopped on the train, and we have no idea even where the train is going. Then sometime later, we wake up from being lost in the thought and find ourselves in a completely different inner terrain.

So the question then is, how do we work with thoughts in our practice? This very pervasive aspect of our minds. Again, here's another verse from the Dhammapada: "Just as a fletcher"—and in case you don't know what a fletcher is, it's someone who makes arrows—"just as an arrow maker shapes an arrow, so the wise develop the mind, so excitable, uncertain, and difficult to control."

That's really what we're all doing here. With quickly passing thoughts, all we really need to do is simply be aware that they pass through the mind. Now, this is simple, but not easy. There was a very renowned Tibetan master of the last century, Dudjom Rinpoche, and he talked about the phenomenon in the mind of the subtle undercurrent of thoughts—those very light thoughts, almost like a constant stream, or perhaps not quite constant but very frequently occurring, very light, that mostly go unnoticed. Dudjom Rinpoche called this undercurrent of thought "the thieves of meditation." Because we don't really know they're there, and yet when we're lost in them, we're not being mindful, we're not being present. It's as if we're asleep.

An interesting exercise, which I've practiced myself and found very illuminating as a way of beginning to attune ourselves to this undercurrent of thoughts, to catching the thieves of meditation: you might, as an exercise, set the intention to watch for these very light passing thoughts. Set the intention perhaps for five or ten minutes at a time, several times a day. It could be in the sitting, it could be walking meditation, it could be simply walking about. Set the intention: "Okay, the next five minutes, I'm going to really watch for these very light thoughts that are passing through." I found this exercise to be extremely illuminating, first because it showed me how frequent they were—much more frequent than I had imagined.

And it also showed me that in those moments—even if it was a short time, five seconds, ten seconds—when we're actually lost in that thought, we're in delusion. We're thinking, but we don't know that we're thinking. And then we wake up from being lost and we come back into awareness, we come back into wisdom. So in doing this exercise, we really begin to see quite clearly the movement of the mind between delusion and wisdom, between being asleep and being awake.

Have you ever had the experience of waking up in the morning—I don't know, maybe this doesn't happen on retreat, but perhaps at home—you wake up and then maybe drift off back to sleep for a minute or two, enter into a dream state, and then you wake up again and you're really awake? Well, my experience in doing this exercise was that every time I got lost in one of these quickly passing thoughts, it was just like dropping off into sleep again, into a dream, and then waking up.

And then further I looked, and I saw that a lot of these thoughts really revolved around some sense of self. Maybe it was a plan, a memory, something I needed to do—somehow revolving around an "I," a sense of "I." And so I started reminding myself: Joseph, stop dreaming yourself into existence. Because that's what was happening in each of these moments of being caught by the thieves of meditation.

I would encourage you to play with this, because first, it really sharpens our mindfulness. It takes interest and diligence to see this clearly. And it reveals so much about the nature of awareness—or its absence.

With longer chains of thought, we can strengthen our awareness of them with another meditative exercise. When you've been lost in a thought for some time and then you awaken from being lost, just take a moment to acknowledge when in that thought process you became aware of it. Very often we become aware of a thought after it's over—we remember, "Oh, I was lost in a thought." Sometimes we become aware of it in the middle. Sometimes, when the mind is really clear and mindful, we can be aware of the thought just as it's arising. And sometimes—this takes a lot of clarity—sometimes we can even pick up the intention to think.

Again, it's not to judge ourselves for when we're picking it up, but simply to acknowledge or to undertake the exercise of recognizing when we do. Because that strengthens our habit of being mindful of thought as an object.

Another helpful attitude with respect to thought was expressed by Suzuki Roshi, who, as most of you probably know, is the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. In a wonderful book called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, he had this very simple suggestion. He said, "Don't be bothered by your thoughts. Let them come and let them go."

But unfortunately, we often are bothered by our thoughts. So as we're working with refining our ability to be mindful of the thinking process, a very important point here is not to add an attitude of judgment about them, or aversion, or resistance to the fact that we're thinking. We simply want to be aware. When we come out from being lost, we want to be aware that we were lost in the thought—without judgment—and actually take delight in the fact of now being aware.

All those times when you're carried away by a thought and then we wake up, and then "Oh," you know, we berate ourselves—"Lost again"—instead of that, when we wake up from being lost in thought, how about delighting in the moment of awareness, delighting in the moment of wakefulness? For as many times as you get lost, that many times do you awaken. It leads to a much happier meditation if we delight in the awakening rather than judge ourselves for having been lost. So it's right in that moment of transition that we can really change our attitude about thinking.

In working with the longer patterns of thought that will often arise, it's helpful to understand a broader meaning of mindfulness. Now, the Pāli word for mindfulness, as many of you know, is *sati*. And the root meaning of this Pāli word is "to remember." So what is *sati*? What is the remembering?

First—and this is the piece that's often not attended to, we don't recognize it as being part of mindfulness—*sati* or remembering in its first aspect is to call to mind, or remembering, what is skillful and what is unskillful, what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. So we're calling to mind that discernment. And the second meaning is remembering the present moment. That's, I think, what we're most familiar with when we think of mindfulness: be in the present moment, be awake to it.

It's really important, though, to begin to exercise the understanding of that first meaning, which in

meditation I think we don't often do. We don't take the time to just acknowledge with these different thought patterns: "Oh, is this a wholesome one? Is this an unwholesome one?"

Now, the problem of being aware of thoughts is that these objects, as you know, are very slippery. They just slide into the mind so unobtrusively—very unlike a sound or a bodily sensation, where the impact of that contact is very noticeable. The impact of the contact of a thought is so subtle that mostly we're not aware of it, and so they just slide in, easily being unnoticed. And that's why they're called the thieves of meditation.

And before we know it, we're carried away in a whole train of mental proliferation.

What's important to understand and acknowledge is that it's not the thought that is the problem. It's our not being aware that we're thinking that's the problem. So meditation doesn't mean to stop thinking, as perhaps some people have that idea. Even though as concentration increases, sometimes the thought process does slow down and perhaps even stops for a while, our practice is honing our ability to be aware when the thought is there, rather than holding some idea that meditation means we're supposed to be stopping our thoughts.

Mindfulness in both of these aspects—remembering the present moment experience and also calling to mind what is skillful or unskillful—serves as a protection for the mind, because this discernment guards us from getting lost in the hindrances, getting lost in the defilements. Without mindfulness, without mindfulness of thought, we simply act out all the habit patterns of our conditioning. Some of them may be skillful, some unskillful, but there's no agency in terms of making the choice of which to cultivate and which to let go of. So mindfulness plays this very critical role in how we're living our lives—in cultivating those aspects of our minds that lead to happiness and letting go of those that lead to more suffering.

Ajahn Sumedho, the American monk who is the senior Western monk in Ajahn Chah's Thai forest tradition, had a very useful reminder about our practice. He said, "Our practice is not to follow the heart, but to train the heart." Sometimes we hear, "Oh, just follow your heart and everything will be fine." Well, for those of you who are experienced meditators and for those who may be new to the practice, I'm sure even after these first few days you've seen that not everything in your heart is beautiful and wonderful and skillful. Maybe a lot is, but we have many habit patterns—some wholesome, some unwholesome. So it's not just following our heart; it's training our heart in the skillful, training our heart in the wholesome.

There's one discourse where the Buddha talks about his life before he became a Buddha, when he was referred to as the Bodhisattva, the being working towards Buddhahood. At this time he had renounced the home life and was off practicing for about six years before his awakening. He talked about one of the exercises he did as a Bodhisattva, as he was training. He said that as different thoughts arose, he would divide them into two classes: the unwholesome ones, rooted in greed and hatred and delusion; and the wholesome ones, those thoughts rooted in non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or mettā, loving-kindness, and non-delusion or wisdom. So he practiced discerning, as these thoughts arose, which category they fell

into.

Now, I'm not suggesting you do this all the time or overburden your mind with trying to figure out whether each thought is wholesome or unwholesome. But it might be interesting to do it at times—perhaps take five minutes or ten minutes where you try to apply that discernment, just to become familiar with the difference between these two classes of thoughts. Another way of doing it would be to pay attention when a wholesome or unwholesome thought is so obvious that you don't even have to think about it, but you take the time to acknowledge, "Oh, this is an unwholesome thought," or "This is a wholesome one." Just becoming familiar with that discernment can be of tremendous benefit, not only in meditation but in all of life.

The reason this is so vitally important—in whatever way you end up doing it, and you can play with it and explore for yourself how to discern the difference—is highlighted in one statement the Buddha made. He said, "Whatever we frequently think about and ponder, that will become the inclination of our minds." Whatever we frequently think about and ponder, that becomes the inclination of our minds.

This is a tremendously important teaching, because frequent repetition of certain thought or emotional patterns, with each repetition, strengthens those neural pathways in the brain, so that those same thoughts and emotions are more likely to occur. That's what the Buddha meant when he said it becomes the inclination of our minds. When it becomes the inclination of our minds, that then leads to habitual actions in our lives. And each of these actions brings about its respective karmic results. So creating agency in the unfolding of our lives has to do with understanding that our actions bring results: wholesome actions bring about happiness, unwholesome actions bring about suffering of one kind or another, and the actions are prompted by our thoughts and emotions. This part of our meditation, this part of our practice, really has a tremendously powerful transformative effect on how we're living.

The Buddha then makes an interesting distinction between how we should be mindful when wholesome thoughts are present and how we should be mindful when unwholesome thoughts are present—two different attitudes with regard to these different classes of thoughts. In the case of unwholesome thoughts, where maybe it's thoughts of greed or aversion, anger, hatred, or just confusion and delusion, the Buddha says we need to have a very active heedfulness and diligence. We need to actively engage mindfulness so we don't stray into these unwholesome patterns. The Buddha used an example—you have to remember that he was living in an agrarian society—he used the example of a cowherd tending to his cows. With unwholesome thoughts, he likened it to

needing to be on guard with the cows when the crops were still in the field, so the cows didn't stray into the field and destroy the crops. Can you get the picture? Field, cows, crops. You have to be careful that they're not going in and trampling on the crops. That's the kind of attentiveness we need with unwholesome thoughts, lest they proliferate.

There's one reflection that I found very powerful in practicing this kind of vigilance, just as a reminder of

why it's important to do so. Again, this is from the Buddha's teachings. He said, "These thoughts rooted in desire or ill will or cruelty lead to affliction and difficulty for myself and others and lead away from wisdom and awakening."

I appreciate this reflection because sometimes we might be aware of these unwholesome thoughts and not realize the impact they're actually having on our minds and our lives. They are conditioning our mind. They're strengthening that pattern. The Buddha is simply reminding us to pay attention to this, to remind ourselves that these kinds of thoughts lead to affliction and difficulty for oneself, for others. They lead away from wisdom, away from awakening.

This kind of reflection from time to time can actually give us a lot of energy and inspiration to pay attention to the quality of our thoughts, not to dismiss them as being non-impactful or unimportant. We can use this reflection, or something like it, as a powerful reminder helping us to disengage from being identified with those thoughts rooted in unwholesome tendencies.

But sometimes the reflection is not enough. Sometimes the pattern is just too strong. I want to give you an example. This goes back many years in my practice—thirty, forty years—to a time when I was having lots of sexual fantasies. They were really pleasant. They were very seductive. And my mind was getting caught again and again. I recognized that this was just desire in the mind, greed in the mind. I would be noting "desire, desire, desire," but it didn't work. I was still getting caught over and over again.

At a certain point, I took my mind in hand and said, "Joseph, enough." It was like the sword of Manjushri. Sometimes we try the more subtle, meditative, reflective approaches, but sometimes we really need to call up our energy in a very direct and active way. "No, this is unwholesome. Enough." And that actually worked. It broke through the seductive power of those fantasies.

Now, the key here—and this is really important—is that the "enough" has to be coming from the strength of wisdom, not from aversion. Because if we're doing it with aversion, we're just adding another unwholesome mind state to the mix. But it is powerful to be strong and have a strong response from a place of wisdom.

So this is how to work with the unskillful, unwholesome thoughts. With wholesome thoughts, wholesome states of mind, mindfulness takes a very different form. The Buddha continued with the example of the cowherd. He said that when the crops are safely harvested, the cowherd can simply rest comfortably under a tree, simply knowing the cows are there.

I love that image. When the mind is in a wholesome state, when there are wholesome thoughts or wholesome states of mind, we don't need that kind of active vigilance. We don't have to be on guard. Rather, we can settle back, relax, be at ease, simply knowing, simply being mindful that this wholesome state of mind is present. Metta is present. Calm is present. Energy is present.

We begin to see the nuances of the application of mindfulness, how it adjusts to the particular experience

that's arising in the moment. In practicing this discernment between different kinds of thoughts, it's also really helpful and important to watch our attitude about the simple fact that we're thinking.

Because for many meditators, we are conscious—or often not conscious—of an underlying attitude about having thoughts arise at all.

I want to read something from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a Burmese meditation master who is very skillful in his approach to the proper attitude in watching the mind. Here is what he said:

"When the mind is thinking or wandering, just be aware of it. Thinking is a natural activity of the mind. You are doing well if you are aware that the mind is thinking. But if you feel disturbed by thoughts, or if you have a reaction or judgment of them, there is a problem with your attitude. The wandering mind is not the problem. The attitude that it should not be around is the problem. When you feel disturbed by the thinking mind, remind yourself that you are not practicing to prevent thinking, but rather to recognize and acknowledge thinking when it arises."

I hope this instruction got through, because we don't want to be judging the thinking mind. We simply want to be aware of it.

So far we've been discussing thoughts on the relative level—that is, how we relate to the specific content of thoughts. It's also possible, and extremely interesting, to be mindful of thought on the more ultimate level, the level of emptiness. Here we become mindful of the nature of thought itself.

Another Tibetan teacher who teaches extensively in the West these days said, "Recognizing a thought is not the same thing as recognizing its nature." Do you see the difference? Recognizing the fact that we're thinking—that's the important foundation. But that's not the same as recognizing, not the content of the thought, but the very nature of thought itself.

One exercise I've done frequently is incredibly illuminating about our lives when thoughts are proliferating. From time to time, as thoughts are happening, as they're arising in the mind, explore this more ultimate nature by simply asking the question: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is the thought as a phenomenon?

If a thought is present in the mind and we're asking this question, we're able to look very directly—okay, this thought is here, what is the thought? What's so fascinating is that when we look at thought in this way, we see it's little more than nothing. It's like a tiny energy blip arising in the mind. There's hardly anything there.

And yet—this is the great paradox, or perhaps we would simply call it the situation—when we look at the nature of thought, we see it's hardly anything at all. Yet when we're unaware that we're thinking, these very same thoughts have tremendous power in our lives. They're like little dictators in the mind. Thoughts arise: go here, go there, do this, do that. We create our whole lives driven by the kinds of thoughts we

have. And yet, when we look at the very nature of thought, it's really empty. It's so ephemeral.

We can see this for ourselves. This is not some teaching we've heard and must simply accept. We can see it directly in each moment when we look: What is a thought?

I would suggest investigating this from time to time because it can be so freeing, especially when we remember this understanding during moments when we're caught up in some problematic thought process. If we can drop down to the more ultimate level and see thought's essentially empty, ephemeral nature, it loses its power to dominate our lives.

As we practice being mindful of thought in all these ways, on both the relative and more ultimate levels, we begin to develop a facility for using the thought process skillfully. Thought can be a powerful tool, a powerful vehicle for understanding if we use it wisely.

As we become more mindful of the thinking process, we can actually direct it in different ways. Thoughts can become a vehicle for wise reflection—what I call our inner Dharma coach. Sometimes, after hearing many teachings and reflecting on your own experience, different phrases may come to mind, reminding you of some Dharma principle appropriate to the situation. When I was working with all that desire, I saw that my usual method wasn't working, so I reflected: okay, enough—time to use the sword of wisdom.

There are many, many aspects of this Dharma coach that keep guiding us in our practice. For example, if you're sitting and feel yourself getting more and more tense for whatever reason, perhaps the Dharma coach will come in with a reminder: it's time to relax, settle back, and be more at ease. Or if the mind is wandering considerably, perhaps the Dharma coach says: bring the attention in closer. These are all thoughts used skillfully, wise reflections about Dharma practice.

Mindfulness of thoughts can also lead us very directly into being mindful of emotions.

Emotions are a whole other big arena of practice, because as we know, emotions are a very complex phenomenon. It's not just a simple experience. Emotions involve thoughts. They involve bodily sensations, bodily energy. They involve different mental affects. And what's interesting is that with different people, there's a wide range in our abilities to know what we're feeling. For some, it's quite difficult. We might be going on in our lives not even recognizing that there's some underlying emotion driving our actions because we haven't trained ourselves to really be aware and mindful of our emotions. For others, maybe that sensitivity is already there—we already know what we're feeling—but if we're not practiced in being mindful of them, then it's easy to get lost and overwhelmed in the flood tide of these feelings.

So there are different ways we can train ourselves to connect with emotions in general, and more specifically, with the afflictive emotions that cause suffering to ourselves and suffering to others. One very interesting aspect of our meditation practice, as we begin to strengthen and develop mindfulness of these mental activities—thoughts and emotions—is observing how a particular thought or image may immediately trigger an emotion to arise. I've watched this in my own mind and been amazed at this

process.

For example, we may think of someone who's hurt us in one way or another. Just as we start thinking of this person, immediately anger might arise, or resentment might arise. All that happened was a thought arose in the mind, but if we're not really mindful in that moment, that thought can immediately trigger an emotional response. Or we think of somebody we love, and immediately there may be a really warm-hearted feeling, an open-hearted feeling. Or we may think of someone that we're really strongly attracted to, and immediately desire or lust may arise.

What's so interesting to me is that all of this can be happening simply sitting and walking or going through the day, without any contact at all with the person. The person may not even be there, and yet the thought of the person is enough to trigger any one of a wide range of emotional reactions.

There's one teaching which sometimes people find challenging, but I find inspiring. And that is the understanding that we are one hundred percent responsible for our minds. We are responsible for what our minds are doing. No one else could be responsible for that. So whatever external situation may be present, when something is arising in the mind—and this may happen when the person is there, but very often the person is not even there—we are responsible for what's arising. To see this connection between thought and emotion is a powerful way of seeing the conditioned nature of emotion.

It's helpful to begin noticing these trigger thoughts for different emotions so that we can become more aware of the emotion itself and also of its impersonal, conditioned nature.

I'll give you another example. This goes back quite a few years. I was living at home, right next to the Insight Meditation Society, and there was a board meeting scheduled for that afternoon. At that time—and this goes back many years—there was a lot of conflict on the board. I was taking a walk before the meeting, and as different thoughts arose in my mind about the meeting, the thought would arise and immediately I would feel some anxiety: "Oh, what's it going to be like? A lot of tension, a lot of conflict." But I noticed this happening—the thought arose, anxiety arose. I became so interested in it that I just started playing with it, intentionally thinking about the meeting to watch the anxiety arise. I wanted to see how impersonal it was. It was an impersonal process of one thing conditioning another.

When we don't catch these trigger thoughts and find ourselves already enmeshed in the emotion, there are other signals that can remind us to investigate what emotion is present. This could be in formal meditation practice or just in the course of our daily lives. When we're feeling unhappy in some way, just out of sorts, ill at ease, or when there are a lot of obsessive thoughts happening in the mind—all of these experiences can be feedback that some underlying emotion is present. Maybe it's unacknowledged worry, or anxiety, or fear, or aversion, or shame. When we're feeling out of sorts, that can become a signal to actually investigate: "Is there an emotion present that I have not been aware of that's causing this feeling?"

When we're not mindful of these underlying emotions, they become an unconscious filter on how we

experience the world. So it becomes really important to gain greater and greater clarity about the emotional underpinnings—often conditioned by thoughts—of our actions in the world and of how we're feeling. Sometimes we don't recognize the emotion that's there because we're misperceiving it.

I was sitting and I was feeling something that I thought was sadness. So I just kept noting "sad, sad, sad"—but it still felt stuck. There was no movement, no connection.

So I just kept looking, looking more carefully. And at a certain point I realized it was unhappiness. It wasn't sadness. Now, these two are related, but they're not the same. And as soon as I saw it was unhappiness, that's when I was in alignment with what was actually there. And in the alignment, there was acceptance. That made it a lot easier to be with it.

Sometimes if we're not sure what the emotion is, we can simply settle back and ask the question, "Well, what's happening now? Just what's happening?" Sometimes that very question opens us up to intuitively recognize—oh, it's sadness, or it's unhappiness, or it's joy, whatever it may be. Or sometimes it's just confusion, and we can note confusion.

This acceptance of what's there does not mean that we're justifying the emotion or wallowing in it or judging it. It's the simple acknowledgment that a particular mind state is present.

There's one form of feedback that is hugely helpful in indicating when we're not being accepting of whatever the experience may be—and that feedback is when we're experiencing some sense of struggle. In meditation, whenever we feel that sense of struggle, it means just one thing: something is arising in the mind, in the body, in the world around us that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

So instead of just being caught up and lost in the struggle, if we take it as feedback—"Oh, something's going on here that I'm not accepting"—then we can settle back and open up. What is it? Is it uncomfortable sensation in the body? Is it a painful emotion?

Sometimes it's difficult to accept what's happening because an emotion might be just too painful to accept. This happens especially for people with some kind of trauma in their background. As we go into our practice and begin to open up to different layers and levels of our experience, sometimes things arise that are really painful to be with. There's a tendency not to want to engage.

In these situations, it's really important to proceed very slowly and very gently—at first, touching it briefly, then just gradually opening to it and stepping back, opening and stepping back, until gradually we expand our capacity to be with these painful feelings. It's not about rushing into them.

From this foundation of clear recognition and acceptance, mindfulness can then discover which emotions are skillful and which are not—just as with thoughts. There are some emotions which, in Buddhist terminology, are called afflictive emotions. They're afflictive in the sense that they cause us suffering. And

there are some emotions which are the cause of happiness. So just as with thoughts, we want to discern the difference so we can cultivate the wholesome and learn to let go of that which is unskillful.

The last step in working with emotions—and this is perhaps the most challenging, but also the most liberating—is that we need to learn how to open to the emotions that we're feeling, to really open to them and feel them, and at the same time, not be identified with them.

This is very tricky. Feeling the joy, feeling the happiness, feeling the anger, feeling the despair—whatever it is, feeling it—and being mindful enough so that we're not identifying with it as being "I" or "mine." This is what turns our emotional world into wisdom.

What does identification with emotions mean? It's when we're lost in the emotional energy of the story, carried away by it, taking the emotion to be self, to be "I," to be "mine." Emotions very often are what we most personalize in our experience, and that's why it's such an important arena of practice.

We want to see the difference between "I'm sad," "I'm angry," "I'm happy," "I'm this or that"—and the understanding that sadness feels like this, happiness feels like this. "This is sadness. This is happiness. This is joy"—where we're not adding the "I" and "mine" to the experience.

There's much greater ease and freedom in our lives when we understand emotions not as who we are, but as experiences arising out of momentary conditions—and disappearing as the conditions change.

There's just one image I'll leave you with in terms of understanding the impersonality of emotions—a kind of metaphor.

Clouds that wander in the sky have no roots, no home. Just picture clouds in the sky—no roots, no home. Emotions are like that. They arise when the conditions are present, like clouds in the sky arising when the conditions are right. And then conditions change, the clouds disappear, the emotions disappear.

Now just think for a moment—conjure up the image of clouds being rooted to the earth, a root coming down from the cloud to the ground. Pretty ridiculous. Clouds don't have roots. Well, one of the things we discover in our meditation is that emotions also, even though they are what we most often personalize, are actually impersonal. They arise out of certain conditions. Conditions change, and the emotions change.

This does not mean distancing ourselves from emotions. We can open to them and experience them fully. So it's not becoming emotionally detached. We're feeling them fully and not identifying with them. This is one of the subtleties and deepening aspects of our practice, and one that is very liberating.

All of these practices that I've mentioned open up possibilities of a much deeper happiness in our lives. When we engage with thoughts and emotions from a place of interest, a place of inquiry, a place of wisdom, we can let them all arise and pass away in this vast open sky of our hearts and minds. This is part of our practice, and a very essential part, because these two domains of thought and emotion are such an important part of our lives.

Let's just sit for a couple of minutes. Let all the words vanish. Settling into the awareness of the present moment with ease, with relaxation, just opening to whatever is present.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes and re-engage with the world around you.

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