Working with Thoughts and Emotions

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 59:00

Tonight I'd like to speak about two of the most far-reaching and pervasive aspects of our experience, aspects that condition both the suffering in our lives and also the possibilities for happiness. These two aspects play out both in our meditation practice and in our lives: the realms of thought and emotion.

In order to have a fuller understanding of how we can work with thought and emotion, I think it's helpful to understand and put them in the context of what are called the two truths. That is, the level of relative conventional truth or reality, and the level of more ultimate truth, more ultimate reality. We can also understand these two levels in another way: the relative level is the level of content and the level of karma, of cause and effect. The more ultimate level we could think of in terms of process or in terms of understanding emptiness.

When we look at thought and emotion in terms of these two levels—the relative and the more ultimate—we see that they work to balance our approach in working with these aspects of our minds. It's important to consider both the relative and ultimate levels because, particularly in spiritual practice, it's very easy to become attached to one level or another. We're very familiar with being attached to the relative level because that's the level of our personal stories and our dramas. We get caught up in the content of our minds, so it's easy to see the attachment to that level. But it's also possible, and this can happen on the spiritual journey, for people to get a glimpse of emptiness, the more ultimate level, and then become attached to that while ignoring the relative. That's the whole phenomenon of spiritual bypass, where we're not attending to the relative, to the content, to the things that need attending to, because we up-level everything—it's all empty. A maturity in practice is really when we understand how these two levels form a union, and we integrate them into our lives.

The union of these two levels was expressed in a very pithy way by the Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim, a Korean Zen master who died some years ago. He said, "There's no right and no wrong"—that's the emptiness level—"but right is right and wrong is wrong." That's the relative level. And we have to hold both. There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong.

The importance of working with thought and emotion is highlighted in all of the different Buddhist traditions. One Tibetan text describes the untrained mind as tumbling like a waterfall. Does that sound familiar in terms of one's own experience? Where the mind is just tumbling with thoughts and feelings and emotions. There's one verse in the Dhammapada, a collection of Buddhist teachings from the Pali Canon, where the Buddha said, "The active mind is difficult to tame, flighty and wandering wherever it will. Taming it is essential, leading to the joy of well-being."

We all know this tendency of the mind to be flighty, wandering where it will. We know this from our own experience. How many times do we hop on trains of thought association? We hop on a particular thought and then there's this train of thought. We don't know that we've hopped on. We have no idea where the train is going. Then somewhere down the line, it's like we wake up and hop off the train, often in a very different mental environment from where we started. We can see this deeply habituated tendency.

The question then is: how do we work with thoughts, this very pervasive aspect of our minds? How do we learn to understand and to creatively shape the thought process? This is again from the Dhammapada. Remember, the Buddha lived around 500 BC, so his images are not necessarily the ones we're familiar with today, but you can imagine from his time. He said, "Just as an arrow maker shapes an arrow, so the wise develop the mind, so excitable, uncertain, and difficult to control."

With quickly passing thoughts, the ones that simply arise and pass through, we can practice refining our awareness of them by beginning to notice where in that thought process we become aware that we're thinking. Just pay attention: where in that process do we wake up? Is it after the thought is already over? That happens very often—we're lost in the thought and then it's over, and we realize, "Ah, I was thinking." Sometimes we wake up in the middle of the thought. Sometimes, when the mind is clear, we can actually be aware just as the thought arises. And sometimes we can even become aware of the intention to think. This is how the meditation can develop at different times. What's important is simply to notice whenever it is that you become aware. This begins to hone our attention with thought, or to thought as an object.

The important point here, as we become mindful of thinking, is not to add a judgment or the attitude of aversion to the thinking process, or resistance. Suzuki Roshi, who was the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*—a classic that came out in the late sixties or early seventies—had a phrase that speaks to this.

He said, "Don't be bothered by your thoughts. Let them come and let them go." What an inviting instruction. Don't be bothered by your thoughts. Let them come and let them go.

But when we have longer trains of thoughts, when we're really lost or caught up for an extended period of time in the whole story, then we need different strategies—or with thoughts that come again and again, repeatedly. In this situation, we need to understand the broader meaning of the Pali word *sati*, which is usually translated as mindfulness, but which has a wide range of meaning and application.

The root meaning of the Pali word *sati* is to remember. And the question is: remember what? Two aspects are highlighted in terms of what we should be remembering in the development of *sati*. One is remembering or calling to mind what is skillful and what is unskillful, what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. And the other aspect we need to remember is the present moment's experience. Here is the meaning of *sati* or mindfulness: coming face to face with what's arising. This is just the opposite of absent-mindedness. There's mindfulness, wise mindfulness, right mindfulness—and there's absent-mindedness, when we're not coming face to face with the present moment.

Mindfulness as remembering the present moment, or we could say settling back into the present moment, counteracts the very strong tendency, both in our meditation practice and in our lives, to be leaning forward into the next experience. We're leaning forward in our lives in anticipation of the next event or the next experience. And in meditation too—this is a common tendency—we're leaning into the next moment. We're with the in-breath in order to feel the out-breath. We're lifting the foot in order to move it forward. There's that slight forward lean.

It's expressed very well in a line by James Joyce describing one of his characters. He wrote, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." And I think Mr. Duffy describes most of us. We're a little bit ahead of ourselves.

One way you can tune into this—and this is a very skillful practice that you can do throughout the day—is to pay attention to the feeling of rushing. You're all familiar with that feeling, that internal sense. What is rushing? What does that feeling come from? We're rushing when the mind is ahead of itself a bit. We're here in order to get there, and we're not actually settled back in the moment.

So as you go through the day, whenever you feel that you're rushing—and it doesn't have anything to do with speed; you can rush moving quickly, you can rush moving slowly, and you can be free of rushing whether moving quickly or moving slowly. I saw this really clearly once when I was paying attention to this in my practice and really noticing it many times during the day, that slight leaning forward. I was doing walking meditation, and then the lunch bell rang. I was walking just as slowly, but I could feel that inner pull toward the dining room.

This mindfulness of remembering the present moment is really helpful. By noticing the times of rushing through the day, you'll notice those times when you are out of the moment, when you're a bit ahead of yourself. And you can stop, cut the momentum, and simply come back.

In remembering the present moment with regard to thought, the challenge is that these objects of mind are very slippery. They seem to slide into our experience, and they don't have a big initial impact. There's not the same impingement on our awareness that, for example, sensations have. When different sensations arise in the body, we're generally aware of them quite quickly. Or even sounds, because there's an impact. But thoughts—they're so sneaky. They just kind of slide in, and we're often unaware that they're there. Before we realize it, we're carried away in this mental proliferation. It's like we're lost in the dream of our own mental activity. And it really is like a dream state, because we're not aware at that time that the thoughts are present. It's as if we're dreaming ourselves into existence.

And that's why mindfulness of thought is such a powerful vehicle for waking up.

Mindfulness of thought in both its aspects—that is, recalling what is skillful and unskillful as one aspect of mindfulness, and also the aspect of remembering the present moment, being connected to the present moment—both of these aspects of mindfulness with regard to thought serve as a great protection for the

mind. Because it keeps us from being lost in all those thought trains that condition our suffering. Suffering for ourselves, suffering for others. Without mindfulness of thought, we are simply acting out all the habit patterns of our conditioning.

The importance of this was highlighted in a teaching by Ajahn Sumedho, the American monk who was the senior disciple of Ajahn Chah and who brought the Thai forest tradition to the West. He said, "Our life in the Dharma is not about following the heart, it's about training the heart." I think this is a really important reminder, because often, in new age circles, we hear "just follow your heart." Being experienced meditators, you already know that not everything in our heart is wholesome. There is a lot that is, but unless you happen to be a saint—and if you are, please let me know—it's not just a question of following whatever arises. It's actually training it.

Part of this training is discerning what's skillful and what's unskillful. Carol spoke last night of the Buddha's discourse on two kinds of thoughts, where he was describing as a bodhisattva how one of his practices was to see what thoughts were skillful and what thoughts were unskillful, what was rooted in greed and hatred and delusion, what was rooted in generosity and love and wisdom. So we begin to actually discern the different kinds of thoughts.

In that same sutta Carol was speaking about, the Buddha goes on to say why this is so important. She mentioned this last night, but I felt I wanted to repeat it again tonight, because it is such an essential teaching that we often overlook. The Buddha said, "Whatever we frequently think about or ponder will become the inclination of our minds." How often do we relate to thought as just a passing phenomenon, thinking it doesn't really have much impact? But whatever we frequently think about and ponder becomes the habit pattern, becomes the inclination. That neural pathway becomes more and more strongly established, and so it's easier for that kind of thought, that same thought, to arise again. We're establishing a habit pattern.

If we realize this, then we can see the importance of discerning what habit patterns we are establishing and deepening and strengthening in our lives. Are we strengthening habit patterns of desire, of ill will? Are we strengthening habit patterns of kindness, of generosity? We do this through mindfulness of our thoughts, discerning what is skillful and what is unskillful.

There's a reflection the Buddha suggested in this same discourse, and I want to read it because it's not something we often do. In the teaching of meditation here, we don't often emphasize reflecting as a method. But there are times when it can be really helpful. This is the Buddha describing his own practice on his path to Buddhahood:

"When a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I understood thus: this thought of sensual desire has arisen in me, and this leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulty, and leads away from nibbāna."

Now this is the part that really struck me. He said, "When I considered 'this leads to my own affliction,' this thought leads to my own suffering, it subsided in me." When we reflect on unskillful kinds of thoughts rooted in unwholesome motivations, if we see it, if we recognize it and then reflect, "This leads to my own affliction"—that becomes a powerful reminder, and it subsided in him. When he considered "this leads to the affliction or the suffering of others," it subsided. When he considered "it leads to the affliction of both," it subsided. Do you see the power of the mind to actually reflect when there's a strong repetition or pattern of thoughts rooted in unwholesome motivations?

So we can really begin to work with our thought patterns, cultivating those which lead to happiness and learning to let go of those which simply cause suffering.

Sometimes this reflection may not be enough. The pattern may be really strong. I had an experience many years ago, in my younger years, when I was on retreat and a strong lustful thought kept coming—thought and image—and it was hugely seductive, just so enticing. I recognized it: "This is a lustful thought, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant." But recognizing it didn't do anything. And I knew it was unwholesome, that it was rooted in greed.

So I needed a stronger strategy. I call it the sword of wisdom. Sometimes when something has been coming up a lot, we've seen it many times, we understand it, there's no danger that we're simply suppressing it. At that point, after ten thousand times, it wasn't a question of suppression. So I said, "Joseph, enough." Take the sword of wisdom. No. Enough of this.

And it really helped. It was like meeting the thought with commensurate strength.

Now, the key to this approach is not doing it with aversion. It's realizing we can have a strength of mind. So much of Vipassana practice, rightfully, is about the yes to things. We talk about opening, about yes, about accepting. A lot of what we do is that move toward acceptance. But there's also a skillful use of no—what I call the wisdom of no—where we see that something's unskillful and we try different approaches.

Imagine raising a child and never saying no. It probably wouldn't be a very happy coexistence. There are times when we need no, but it can be done in a loving way.

So again, this is the play of practice. I hope you get the sense that this whole retreat, as I mentioned, is a laboratory for investigation. We're discerning what thoughts are skillful, what are unskillful—which is an aspect of mindfulness. We play with different ways of cultivating what's wholesome, of letting go what's unwholesome. We see what method is going to be effective.

We also, with regard to thoughts, need to look not only at this discernment of skillful and unskillful, at what patterns we are strengthening—we also have to examine our attitude about thinking itself. Because, as I think Carol mentioned, it's very easy to come into the practice with the idea that we want to stop thinking, or that thinking is bad.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks a lot about this. I just want to read a few of his suggestions. 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. 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 whenever it arises. It does not matter whether thinking stops or not. It is more important that you understand whether your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, appropriate or inappropriate, necessary or unnecessary."

So when the mind is caught up in a lot of thought, in addition to the discernment of wholesome and unwholesome, really check the attitude in the mind about the fact that you're thinking. Is there aversion? Is there judgment? Is there resistance? Or is there simple awareness of it?

We've been speaking mostly about thought and dealing with thought on the relative level, the level of content. But in our practice we also want to understand thought on the more ultimate level of emptiness. This is when we're investigating not the content of thought, but the very nature of thought itself.

A question that has been very profound for me in my practice, especially when there are many thoughts coming, is one I often ask myself: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is a thought as a phenomenon?

It's very interesting. And yet this is a question probably very few people in the world have ever asked themselves. Mostly we're just lost in our thoughts and acting them out. But when we're looking directly at a thought, when it's there and we ask, "Well, what is this as a phenomenon?"—it's completely fascinating. We see that in and of itself, a thought is little more than nothing. It's a completely insubstantial, ephemeral phenomenon.

What's so amazing about this is to see that when we're unaware of thinking, when we're not mindful, thoughts have tremendous power in our lives. Thoughts are like little dictators in the mind: Go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced. Our whole life, it's like we're just doing the bidding of all these thoughts. There's tremendous power when we're not mindful of them.

And yet as soon as we are mindful of a thought as a thought, as soon as we see its nature, we see it has no power at all. It's a completely empty phenomenon. When we really see that clearly, it's revelatory. It really changes how we're living, what we're doing, and what we choose to act on.

Khenpo Rinpoche, who was one of the great Tibetan masters of the last century—his teachings are quite amazing and clear—wrote this about thoughts: "When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors.

Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions—light, moisture, air. In the right conditions, a rainbow appears. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all. There is therefore no logical reason why thoughts should have so much power over us,

nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us. But as long as we take our deluded thoughts as real, they will continue to torment us mercilessly as they have been doing through countless past lives.

And whether you believe in past lives or not, we know just in this life the merciless torment of the thinking process.

This insight into the empty nature of thought is not some esoteric advanced practice or teaching that requires thirty years in a cave to understand. We can understand this right now if we take thought as an object, if we see that a thought can be an object of mindfulness in the same way that a sensation or a sound or the breath or movement can be—it's just another object for our attention. And we can take an interest in it.

One game you can play—I call it the thought game. If you're interested in investigating this more deeply, you might take ten or fifteen minutes in a sitting where you decide that your only object of awareness is going to be thought. It's like sitting back in a movie theater, just watching the screen of the mind, simply waiting for thoughts to come.

First, because you're waiting for them, you'll actually be happy when they do come. Instead of fighting them, you think, "Oh good, a thought! That's what I'm waiting for." So this changes your attitude entirely—we actually become happy to see them. Then we begin to notice, because we're watching the screen of the mind, that thoughts appear on many different levels. Some are really loud and clear and obvious, and some are soft and subtle, like whispers in the mind. And some sneak up from behind: "Oh, I'm doing pretty good." So we need a 360-degree screen.

Try this if it appeals to you. Just do it for ten or fifteen minutes, and you'll see that there's an immediacy to our ability to really learn about the nature of thought—both on the relative level, discerning the content, understanding what's wholesome and unwholesome, and even more liberating, seeing thought on the more ultimate level of its emptiness, its insubstantiality.

Mindfulness of thought can also lead quite directly into a greater awareness and mindfulness of emotions. As we all know, emotions are complex phenomena. An emotion is a constellation of physical sensation, of thought, of different qualities of the heart—all together they constitute what we call an emotion.

There is a wide range in our ability to know what we're feeling. For some people, for whatever reason of conditioning, it may be quite difficult to connect with what we're feeling. We might be going through our lives not really understanding or recognizing that there is some underlying emotion motivating many of our actions. Maybe it's an underlying emotion of desire, or fear, or unworthiness, or shame—it could be anything. The emotion is there and we may not have tuned into it, yet it's conditioning how we act and are in the world.

For other people, we may actually know what we're feeling, we may recognize what emotion is there, but

still be caught up and lost and carried away, identified with it—carried away in this flood tide of emotion. We know what the emotion is, but we haven't yet found a skillful way of being with it.

There are different ways we can train ourselves to be mindful of emotions in general, and more specifically with the afflictive emotions—those feelings that cause suffering in our lives, both for ourselves and others.

One very interesting aspect of our minds to observe—and I've taken tremendous interest in this—is how a particular thought or image can trigger immediately an emotional response. We may think of someone who hurt us in some way, and immediately it triggers anger or ill will or resentment. Or we think of someone we love, and just in the moment of seeing the image or having the thought, it triggers an open-hearted feeling. Or we might think of someone we're strongly attracted to, and just the image or thought of that person arises and maybe immediately lust arises in the mind.

These trigger points can be so quick, so immediate. And all of this can be happening just as you're here, sitting and walking and moving about, with no actual contact with that person at all.

That whole emotional reactivity can be triggered simply by an unnoticed thought or an unnoticed feeling. And even when they are noticed, if we can watch this process—seeing the thought and how it can trigger an emotion—it really helps us both to be more mindful of the emotion, because we're seeing it right from the beginning, and also we begin to see more and more deeply the conditioned nature of that emotion.

I've played with this a lot and I just find it fascinating. One time I was noticing how particular thoughts of a person and a situation would trigger either anxiety or ill will. With one situation, it was something I had to do, and I had the thought about it and felt a little anxious. Another was thinking of a person with whom there had been a little bit of conflict—the person came to mind and immediately there was a feeling of irritation and annoyance.

In noticing this, I started playing. I started intentionally having those thoughts. I would intentionally think of that person or think of that situation. And it's just like pressing a little button. Thought of the person, ill will. Thought of the situation, anxiety. And I kept doing this. It was just amazing to me, the process of seeing it—how does that happen? How can a thought in the mind trigger quite a big response?

At a certain point, just as I was playing with this phenomenon, the impersonality of it all became so obvious it became humorous. It was just watching the mind do its thing. And it really helped to see the conditioned nature of these emotions. I don't know whether you find it as amusing as I do, but there it is.

Another way of tuning into emotions that we might not have noticed: one of the signals I've found useful is simply to see when we're going through the day and there's some feeling of unease or unhappiness, something that just doesn't feel quite right. That itself, that feeling of unease, can be a signal for us to look, to take a little more care and investigate. Is there an underlying emotion here that I'm not paying attention to, that I'm not open to, that I'm not aware of? It might be unacknowledged worry, or

unacknowledged anxiety, or fear, or aversion. Something is going on which is giving us that feeling of unease. So we can use the uneasiness as a wake-up call to ask, what is the emotion that's underneath? If we don't tune into it, then these underlying emotions can become the unconscious filter through which we're looking at all experience.

Another reminder to look at what's going on in terms of unacknowledged emotions: I find when you're going through the day and you're doing something and you just have some sense that it's not quite right, that's a signal worth heeding. I'll give you an example. This happened years ago. I was on retreat here at IMS. You know in the dining room sometimes at lunch there'll be a dish and in front there'll be a little sign: "Moderation please." So I was going through the line and they had this sign in front of something I really liked. I'm going through the line thinking, I really like this, I've been on a long retreat, and I deserve it. So I took more than I really should have. But even as I was doing it, there was this feeling: this isn't quite right.

That feeling—oh, this is a little bit off—prompted me to ask, what's going on here? I started looking at what was underneath that action. And I saw it, I mean it's obvious: I saw the greed and the desire. Then I was back at my place at the table eating, and I felt the shame and the embarrassment. I kept looking over to see if there was enough left for people at the end of the line. That whole meal was consumed by these emotions.

So we can use these times when something is telling us, this doesn't feel quite right, to actually look, to investigate what happens both as a motivation and as a consequence of those actions. It all becomes food for our understanding. We want to understand all these different aspects of ourselves and all the different emotions that may be driving our actions.

Sometimes we don't recognize what's going on because we mistake one emotion for another. We're misperceiving what's actually there. One common misperception, which could be a whole talk in itself, is confusing attachment and love. These are two quite different states. But that's for another talk.

Another example of misperceiving, which was very striking to me: I was on retreat and I was feeling really sad for whatever reason. I was just noticing it—sad, sad, sad—but it felt locked in in some way. It didn't feel like it was just moving through. So then I began to wonder, well, what's really going on here?

When I looked more carefully, I saw that it wasn't sadness—it was unhappiness. They're related, but they are different feelings, not the same thing at all. As soon as I recognized clearly what it was, that made possible the acceptance of it, and the acceptance made possible the letting go. As long as I was misperceiving the emotion, I wasn't aligned with what was actually there, and so it was not possible to get to that place of acceptance.

I'm not suggesting at all that with every feeling that comes up you go on an investigative quest, asking "What's this? Am I perceiving it correctly?" Not that at all. But if you feel caught in some way—if you're going along and you really feel stuck in some emotional state, and you try different ways of relating to it

and being with it—then at that time you might look and ask, "What's really happening here?" Just to see if you're perceiving it correctly.

Clear recognition makes possible the next step in working with emotion: mindful acceptance. We can recognize clearly and accurately what emotion is there, but another whole understanding involves our relationship to that emotion. Mindful acceptance doesn't mean justifying it, doesn't mean wallowing in it, and doesn't mean judging. Rather, it's the simple acknowledgment that a particular state is present.

The Buddha spoke very directly to this in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness. The first instruction he gave in working with the hindrances and different mind states and emotions was this: if sensual desire or aversion or worry or any other state is present, one knows desire or aversion or restlessness is present. It's that simple. First, simply to know that it's present. That's the mindful acceptance of what's arising.

Now, one indication of non-acceptance—and this has proved very useful to me over the years of practice—is recognizing the sense of struggle. In the course of your day, just notice when it feels like you're struggling. Struggle means only one thing: something is going on in the body or in the mind that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

This is powerful feedback. Instead of getting lost in the struggle and feeling sorry for ourselves or discouraged, take struggle as a mindfulness bell. Struggle is telling us something is happening that we're not open to. It may be feelings in the body, it may be difficult emotions, it may be the fact that the mind is thinking a lot. If we're not accepting of it, we're going to be struggling. So use that as feedback to look, to really see.

We all have established a comfort zone of experience that we're comfortable with. In our meditation practice, we come to the boundaries of what we're comfortable with—maybe intense physical sensation, maybe strong emotions. We get to that edge of our comfort zone, and it's very interesting to observe what we do at that point. Do we just pull back to get comfortable again? Or are we willing to say, "Let me open to this"?

When we open, our comfort zone gets bigger and bigger. My imagination of the Buddha mind—and this is just an imagination—is a mind without boundaries, where there's no edge, where the mind is totally free in the awareness of whatever's arising.

In this process of opening, we also need to be careful when we're at that edge, because sometimes things are coming up that can be too intense or overwhelming for our ability to be balanced. Sometimes people are reliving old traumas or very intense experiences, and we may not have the capacity at that time to open. When we're losing balance, when we're feeling overwhelmed by what's arising, then the wise and skillful thing to do is to pull back a little, to come to a place of more balance, of more ease. When we've regained some balance, we can again approach the edge. This is the dance of bringing mindfulness to

these edges, to these boundaries, and then proceeding appropriately.

The last step in working with emotions—and this is both the most challenging and the most liberating, with those that are afflictive and those that are skillful—is learning how to be with all emotions without identifying with them, without taking them to be self.

And it's this understanding that transforms all emotions into wisdom.

So what does identification with emotion mean? We're very familiar with it. It's when we're lost or caught up or identified. "I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm excited, I'm enthusiastic, I'm depressed." In all of those ways of being with emotion, we have created the sense of self in them. What we learn through practice, through being mindful of emotion, is that the "I" and "mine" are extra. We can open to all of these states and be completely connected with them, feel them and experience them, without identification, without personalizing them.

For myself, the main afflictive emotion in my practice over the years was fear. It would come up for a long time in very intense ways. It was as if my energy system was opening to primal fear. It wasn't rational—there were times when I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. Irrational, but the emotion was just very powerful.

I worked with this for years, and it took me that long to understand that all that time I was recognizing the fear was there, but I was taking recognition to be mindfulness. Really, I was with it in order for it to go away. All along there was aversion to the fear, and I didn't realize for quite a while that the aversion was feeding it. It was only when I came to a place of acceptance that non-identification could happen. It was expressed as a very vivid thought in my mind: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay. It's okay."

So I actually offer this to you as a magic mantra for the next six weeks or three months: "It's okay." Whatever's arising, it's okay. Because it reminds us to soften, to settle back—that it may be unpleasant, but it's okay to feel it.

One last comment about emotions: how we relate to them depends on our level of understanding. What may make one person very upset, what may feel difficult in one situation, may leave another person quite at ease.

My favorite story illustrating this is about the Zen master Ryokan, the poet, hermit, and monk who was very poor and lived in the mountains of Japan, wandering through the villages. He had almost nothing. One day he came back to his hut and the few possessions he had were stolen—everything was gone. But he was a great haiku poet, and so he wrote:

The moon at the window—the thief left it behind.

Just imagine going home after this retreat and everything is stolen. "Oh, the moon at the window."

Probably not.

Our emotional response to things very much depends on the level of wisdom we bring. I think you'll see in the course of this retreat, as we develop a deepening wisdom about how to work with thoughts and emotions, that our relationship to them becomes much freer. We come to live our lives seeing how different thoughts and emotions are simply conditioned arisings in this open, clear sky of the heart and mind.

This is our practice, and this is the potential for greater freedom for all of us.

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