Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:04:40

So the question was about the understanding that refuge really means a kind of safety or protection, and understanding how the precepts provide that, but wondering about the other refuges—in the Buddha and the Dharma and the Sangha—how they work.

This could be a whole talk.

In terms of refuge in the Buddha, I think this was talked about on the opening night, but it's worth understanding what that means for oneself on different levels. On one level, the Buddha was a historical person who gave certain teachings, and we have access to those teachings. The teachings themselves provide a refuge, first in their clarity. It's really quite amazing as you read the suttas, this vast body of teachings, and see the clarity with which the Buddha understood the nature of this mind and body, what are the causes of suffering, and what's the potentiality for freedom. So it is a real refuge.

We can take refuge in that clarity rather than living our lives in a lot of confusion, as most of the world does. We can see the fruit of not actually knowing, on some deep level, what are the causes of happiness, what are the causes of suffering, and not having a certain methodology to be able to make those choices. Without this, we're simply acting out unconsciously the habit patterns of our conditioning. So that's a huge refuge—the clarity of understanding and the methodology of practice. In some way, that is also the refuge in the Dharma.

You may know this quite famous story in the texts where there was a monk who was completely enamored of the physical form of the Buddha. He would always be sitting and just gazing at the form. That might be seen as devotion, but at a certain point the Buddha admonished him and said, "You could look at this form for a hundred years and not see the Buddha. It's only those who see the Dharma, who understand the Dharma, who see the Buddha." In that way, the refuge in the Buddha and the refuge in the Dharma are the same. When we understand the Dharma, that's when we're seeing the Buddha.

The refuge in the Sangha, again, can mean many things. Very traditionally, Sangha refers to the monastic Sangha—that's the traditional meaning of the term, nuns and monks. There is a certain refuge in this, even though most of us in the West may not have an intimate connection with the monastic Sangha, although many of you might. There can be a tremendous appreciation for realizing that you can almost say the institution of the monastics over 2,600 years has preserved the teachings. We're benefiting from all of those nuns and monks over thousands of years who have preserved the teachings and made them accessible to us. So that's one meaning.

Another meaning is what's called the Arya Sangha, and that refers to any being, lay person or monastic, who has realized at least one of the stages of awakening, of realization, who has really realized for themselves the depth of the Buddhist teachings. This is a refuge in a sense, and I'm actually glad you asked the question because this is something I think is sometimes not emphasized enough in the West. It's a refuge in the understanding that awakening, enlightenment, liberation, freedom, peace—whatever word you want to put on it—is actually possible. Now we can hold that as an aspiration in our practice.

Very often, and you see this in the tremendous popularization of mindfulness, which is a great thing and is really helping a lot of people, that popularization is devoid of the understanding that this leads to something profound. This has the potential to free the mind, to actually free the mind from the forces of greed and hatred and delusion, which are so deeply embedded. When we take refuge in the Sangha, the Arya Sangha—all those beings, monastic and lay people who have realized this for themselves, even to the first stage—it makes real the possibility. That's a tremendous refuge in our lives. We can have the aspiration of awakening as the pole star guiding us on our path.

You're in a fantastic situation here where your whole day, every day for six weeks or three months, is just about mindfulness and paying attention and waking up. All of that can be done with this vast aspiration: let this be for my own liberation and the benefit of all others. That's a tremendous refuge where we enlarge the potential. We enlarge our understanding of what's possible.

The next question referenced Guy's talk on Sunday night, quoting from Nisargadatta with the phrase "the disaster of separation"—and recognizing how we're living a whole lifetime with deep anxiety around that. The questioner said they're not asking how to get rid of it, but for some guidelines about what to look for in it, sensing there's a very important lesson to be learned here.

Although you're not asking how to get rid of it, I'm going to tell you.

And in the telling, it will also point to what to look for.

"That's what I'm not trying to get rid of."

Don't expect to get rid of that specifically.

"Well, don't hold on to it too tightly because loneliness—" You just shifted my...

I was just talking with a yogi in an interview. There's a book that I've been wanting to write for years. It's basically a three-sentence book, so you would think I could have written it by now. The title of the book is *The Myth of Intimacy*.

What I mean by that is that the general myth of intimacy is that it requires someone else—requires another being to create that field of intimacy. And in one way or another, if that's not present in our lives, we often feel lonely. We feel that sense of separation. So that's the myth of intimacy.

The experience—or at least my experience—of intimacy has nothing whatsoever to do with the presence or absence of another person. It has to do with something you need to take in, because it would be easy to let these words just slide over you. But they actually refer to your experience while you're here.

Practice is actually to experience—and you do experience, even if you're not paying attention to it in this way—that we are becoming completely intimate with each moment. So if you're sitting and feeling the breath and there is a complete connection and feeling of that breath, there is no separation in that moment. Or hearing a sound. When you are totally hearing a sound and just hearing, or totally feeling the sensations of a breath, in that moment, are you lonely? I don't think so. Because there is a complete being one with the experience. There's not a duality in that moment that creates separation, which then can result in the feeling of loneliness.

As I mentioned in this interview, years ago when I first went to India, I was walking with Munindraji, my first teacher, around Bodh Gaya, just in the little villages around Bodh Gaya on these dirt paths. And he said something then which at the time I dismissed. I thought it was very hokey. For those of you not native English speakers, do you know what the word hokey means? It's a hard word—silly. I didn't take it seriously. But he said, as we'd be walking around, "I'm never lonely. I'm friends with the clouds. I'm friends with the flowers. I'm friends with the dust on the path." And again, when I heard it at the time, I was about twenty-one years old and it did not go over too well.

But over the years of my practice, I have so come to appreciate the depth of what he was trying to tell me—that when we actually are fully experiencing whatever it is that's arising, there is that ongoing sense of intimacy and non-separation and non-loneliness. It's only when we separate ourselves from experience that this feeling emerges.

And just as an example of this, which often strikes me both in watching yogis on retreat and being on retreat myself: what do you think somebody who has never done intensive meditation practice would think of somebody spending half an hour or an hour walking fifteen steps back and forth? It would probably look like an insane asylum. And they would probably think, "That is the most boring thing in the world." They couldn't imagine doing it. And yet when we do it, as you know, when the mind is fully there, just that, just that movement—it's amazing. To be so completely one with the flow of sensations, everything is complete in that moment.

So all that being said, in those moments when you're not fully engaged in that way, and there is a sense of separation for whatever reason, and the feeling of loneliness should arise—"Lonely. Lonely. Loneliness is like this." If you can recognize it and accept it and not be afraid of it and not be averse to it, and remember that as soon as you are reconnected with the moment that sense of separation disappears—there's talk about refuge. That is a fantastic refuge.

So if you'd like to buy the book, *The Myth of Intimacy*, it'll be available some year.

It's so interesting to me—we're so conditioned to think that our happiness, our fulfillment, our connectedness depends on something outside of ourselves, on someone outside of ourselves. And it's all how we're relating to the moment, to the world. It doesn't really depend on how the world is relating to us.

"In regards to anattā, I understand how the ego is anicca, but can you speak on who owns the karma that we should own?"

Okay, so the question is about anattā and how the ego is anicca.

"But like in reincarnation, in the idea—"

Yes, yes. If there's no self, who's reborn?

If there's no self, who experiences karmic results? Just so you know, I think the most frequently asked preface to a question is, "If there's no self, then..." This whole notion of selflessness is so counterintuitive. Our whole lives and conditioning in the world and language—it's all revolving around the subject. That's why the Buddhist teaching and our practice in the realization of selflessness is like a little bombshell in the midst of the solidity of that conditioning.

The understanding really has to do with seeing more and more clearly that this mind-body process, as you see and realize, is changing moment to moment. Each moment is conditioning the next and conditioning the next, but there's no element which is carried over.

Consider a few different examples. If you plant a seed in the ground and the seed germinates and sprouts, becomes a sapling, becomes a tree, bears fruit, the fruit drops to the ground, producing a new seed—it's not that the first seed was carried into the sapling and then into the tree and then into the fruit, and that same seed then falls to the ground. There's nothing carried over. It is more a process of transformation, of becoming. The seed, due to various conditions, becomes this, becomes this, becomes this. This is the process of becoming, which is what the Buddha called this whole cycle of life and death. It's just a process of becoming due to conditions, but it's becoming lawfully. When you plant an apple seed, you don't get a mango tree. There are laws governing the unfolding of the process. One of the laws is the law of karma, but there are other laws—the basic laws of science—which also govern the unfolding of the process.

Selflessness does not imply that the unfolding process is unlawful or chaotic or random. There can be a stream of consciousness arising and passing, arising and passing. What we would call your stream of consciousness is a different stream than mine—we're using "yours" and "mine" conventionally. But in that stream there's no one thing, no self underneath the flow of changing phenomena. That's what's meant by selflessness: there's no enduring, unchanging entity to whom the process is happening. The process is unfolding moment after moment, but it is unfolding according to certain laws, and therefore the whole laws of cause and effect and karma can happen selflessly. They're not happening to someone. They are actually a description of how the process is unfolding.

It would be very interesting, when we talked about noticing every part of your experience, particularly noticing intention in the mind—when you notice an intention to do something, that's a mental phenomenon. The mental phenomenon becomes a condition for a physical action to take place. There's no one behind it. What we are is that process unfolding. We call that whole process self, and conventionally, using conventional language, it's fine to use that term. It's just that we're misled into thinking that all experience refers back to someone.

So instead of thinking of it like this—my thoughts, my feelings, my movement, my actions, everything referring back here—you might think of it like this: thoughts are arising, feelings are arising, sensations are arising, and they're arising and falling lawfully. This conditions this, conditions this, conditions this. We call the pattern of an unfolding life "self," which is fine. We use that conventionally. But there's no one there to whom it's happening. What we are is this unfolding process.

Has all of this been the cause of more confusion or less confusion? Or neither?

"Well, I have insights about how that makes sense, but is it integrated? No."

Patience. This is the hardest teaching. To have at least a clear understanding, even if it's just on the conceptual level—but by now it's probably dropped down somewhat, even more than the conceptual level—some glimpse of understanding it.

"In saying equanimity, that others may own their karma, it's kind of like in regards to time and space, this is your unfolding process here..."

Well, I think one of the difficulties, for example in that equanimity phrase—"you" or "I am the heir of my own karma"—we just need to be careful because even within the Buddha's teachings, very often we're using conventional language, conventional designation.

The Buddha used conventional language, talking about "I" and "you." People would come to him asking, "Where has this person been reborn?" Conventional language can be used. We just want to understand that it's being used on that conventional level, not on the level of ultimate reality—it's not the language of selflessness. So there's no need to be confused by it. It's fine to use such language.

Even in metta practice, the practice is happening on the relative level of being. "May you be happy, may I be happy." It would be very awkward to say, "May the five aggregates sitting over there be at ease." So there's really no problem in using the appropriate language. But we want to understand what is really the more ultimate reality underneath it all.

Student: During this process, I'm seeing that there are some beliefs that are now quite easy to see. And with the forgiveness practice, there's been a lot of opening up around all the actions taken from these beliefs. But I perceive a little fear about going back and acting from these beliefs again, because now it's so

easy—or let's say, here it's easier—to see them.

Joseph: Well, there was one couple that stayed at the Forest Refuge for four years. You can just move in.

Obviously it is easier here, because this is a very protected environment with very little distraction. That's the great beauty and gift of a retreat like this. My experience is that, having gone in and out of retreat endless times over the last fifty years, it was a lot harder in the beginning. The disjunction between the two was quite big at first. But in just continuing the practice in a really committed way—being in retreat, then out of retreat, then back in retreat over many, many years—it actually does become more and more integrated. There's less of a sense of such a big difference, because through the repetition of seeing what's wholesome and what's unwholesome, you just see it over and over again, both here on retreat in our own minds, and then being watchful in our lives in the world, watching that same thing. What actions are causing suffering to myself or others? What actions don't? Just the repetition of that—which is why it's called practice.

There's a story of the great cellist Pablo Casals. At ninety-three, he was still practicing three hours a day. Someone asked him—here's this great master—"Why are you still practicing three hours a day?" And he said, "I'm beginning to see some improvement."

So you really want to think of practice both here while you're on retreat, but also the cycles of being in and out of retreat. Our understanding is not a slope that just goes steadily upward—it's not that it just gets clearer and better and purer in a straight line. It's much more like this—up and down. But the overall slope of the curve is going up. There will be a lot of ups and downs, times when we're really clear and bright and in harmony, and then in some way we fall or forget. And then again we reconnect. But over time, the slope of the curve is rising, and we find the Dharma more and more integrated in our lives. I would just have confidence in that.

One area—and the teaching isn't so appropriate for the middle of a retreat, so I'll just mention it briefly—but it has tremendous benefit out in the world: exploring in depth and practicing with commitment right speech. In our lives in the world, we talk a lot. Most of the day we're in conversation one way or another. It's not so often that people actually pay attention before they speak to what they're about to say. So just that, as an arena of practice for bringing the Dharma into the world, would be huge.

Student: In yesterday's forgiveness meditation, going through the three phrases—receiving forgiveness or giving forgiveness—we used the phrasing about harms of which we're aware and also unaware. I'm really interested in the "unaware" piece. I think because it's probably the most frequent and most pervasive way we cause harm, through microaggressions or privilege—white privilege, entitlements. So I'm curious, even at a place like IMS, where there are few distractions but all of this is very much alive, even with amazing yogis who probably have the best intentions on the planet and are really committed to non-harm—what

do we do with that? Are we really off the hook just because of the good intention?

Joseph: That's a great question. It's obviously easier to connect with asking for and extending forgiveness when we're conscious of the harm that was done. When we're not conscious of it—

we can start, I mean, just as a foundation for practice, simply asking for blanket forgiveness for all the things we've been unaware of. At least there's a seed of wisdom in that—in acknowledging that we may have done many things out of ignorance. Even that is significant, because many people don't even recognize that this is a part of their lives. So it's not insignificant, even if we're not yet conscious of the actual harm being done.

A lot of the work is actually in educating ourselves in those arenas where we may have some inkling that we're causing harm, but we don't quite know what it is. I'll give you a few examples. The staff, the teachers, and the board here have been doing considerable work over these years in trying to understand and undo racism through various trainings. It's been so illuminating of exactly what you're describing—unconscious behavior slowly becoming conscious.

Just one piece from the training became more and more obvious: as you say, good intention is not enough, because there's a difference between intention and impact. We can have a good intention, and yet the impact of what we do may be harmful. Taking that in enlarges the arena of our investigation. Instead of simply noticing our intentions as best we can, we also start paying attention to the impact of those actions on the people around us. That's a beginning, where we're sensitizing ourselves to this dimension. Much of the work of becoming aware of unconscious harm involves self-education—realizing that these areas exist and taking it upon ourselves to learn about them and to see. It's a big arena, and I think we all have that responsibility.

I'll give you another example. Some years ago, there was a yogi on retreat who was, I didn't know until later, a very high-powered government consultant at the highest levels, doing considerable aid work around the world. Part of the Buddhist teachings, which I had expressed very often and fully believed, is a phrase found in different texts: "Everything rests on the tip of motivation." The motivation is really the key. He came into an interview and really got on my case about that. He said, "Yeah, that's half of it." But he had seen many situations in the world where the motivation for a particular aid action was good, yet the result was terrible—because there was not a good understanding of the situation. That was another way of opening up the recognition that it's more than just motivation. We need to enlarge our area of investigation. What is the result? What is the impact? Because often we act perhaps with good intention, but perhaps also with considerable delusion about the situation, where we're not really seeing or understanding it well.

One of the things that is almost the inevitable result of intensive practice is humility. It's almost impossible to sit and watch the mind, as we're all doing, and not develop a huge humility. When we really take an honest look at our minds and see everything that's in them, we just have to acknowledge, "Oh, there's a lot

going on here." Much is beautiful—as you know, there are many beautiful qualities. But there's also considerable ignorance, where we're not seeing unskillful things. The beauty of the practice is that we get to see it. In that sense, it's really quite a courageous thing for people to sit down and look to see what's really there.

A question came up about understanding or getting a better idea of how the teaching culture has shifted over time. When many of us were practicing in Asia, the goal of enlightenment, Nibbāna, was clearly articulated—that's why you went to practice. It was very strong. As we've taught in the West over many years, that emphasis seems to have faded somewhat in terms of the clarity with which it's put forward as the goal. I think that is true, which is why I was glad the question came up earlier.

One of the reasons for this shift is that, as we began teaching in the West, we really saw the potential and actualized hindrance of what you could call over-striving, where that goal orientation became out of balance.

Instead of being an aspiration that one was practicing towards, it became a vehicle for tightening people in their practice, for over-striving. And so it's possible we overcompensated, saying "just relax back into the moment, let it unfold."

So for those of you who are not over-strivers, this is only for you. The over-strivers, don't listen. For the non-over-strivers: Nibbana or bust. For the over-strivers: relax. There's a natural unfolding to the practice.

This is a good question, and it's part of something very interesting to observe—the larger picture of the transmission of the Dharma to the West. This is a huge transmission to a new culture, and relatively speaking, it's still very new. That it's really become so active here—thirty, forty, fifty years is nothing in the long history of the Dharma. So I think we're all really the laboratory for what works, what doesn't work, what needs to be emphasized, what doesn't. But just emphasizing what the first question was about: to really understand that the very opening lines of the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, declare this is the direct path to liberation. This is the direct path to the realization of Nibbana.

Just to clarify, Nibbana is not some heavenly space where you're going to sit back and simply enjoy. The clearest understanding of Nibbana, and I love this particular expression of it because it's so pragmatic, not metaphysical—the Buddha described Nibbana as the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion. When the mind is free from those conditioning forces. And so you can see that when you're practicing with that in mind, what we're practicing in each moment is to be with what's arising without clinging, without aversion, without delusion. Then we are actually practicing, you could say, temporary, momentary Nibbana. This makes it much more real rather than some kind of far-off abstraction.

A question came about the cause of dukkha—tanha—and the questioner said, "I think I'm outing myself as a striver perhaps. Tanha should be abandoned. What I'm starting to perhaps realize on some small level is

that it's almost like not moving. The impulse to try to abandon is—I'm in the quicksand at that point in a way. I don't know how to articulate it, but I think you understand what I'm trying to convey. And I guess I started thinking about kalpas. You know the old story about the bird with the silk over the mountaintop. Maybe that's how tanha is abandoned, in some more gradual style."

So the question is about the second noble truth, that craving is the cause of suffering, and the abandonment of craving—but how the mind can get caught up in the quicksand of efforting to abandon craving, which can just be another craving. And whether it's just this incredibly slow process. The Buddha described an eon, which is this vast amount of time—I forget how large the mountain was, but a large mountain, and a bird every hundred years just running a silk cloth over the top of the mountain. An eon is how long it would take for that mountain to wear away. So the question is whether that's what it's going to take to abandon craving.

Some years ago I actually had a significant shift on retreat, a shift in my understanding of the very question you're asking. For a long time in my practice, I saw the end of craving as the goal of practice. And I would practice, practice, practice, and maybe in twenty years or thirty years or ten lifetimes or an eon, I'll reach the end of craving. That was a little discouraging.

But in this particular retreat, in just reflecting a little bit about the Four Noble Truths and what they meant, I really understood that the end of craving can be understood and realized in each moment. It's not just about the final uprooting of all craving. The experience of the end of craving, the Third Noble Truth, can actually be present in every moment. There can be an end of craving in that moment, an end of craving in this moment—and that is a genuine realization of it, even if it's just for that moment.

One aspect of the teachings, and I'm glad we have the chance to talk about this because it can be a very immediate practice—one of the most common tendencies in meditation, and I've seen it in my own practice and working with yogis over all these years, is this very strong tendency to be leaning into the unfolding process. We're actually experiencing this mind-body as a process unfolding. We feel it in terms of the energy sensations in the body—maybe there's tension that is unwinding, or an emotion that's opening, or a breath that's going in and then out. The whole system we often experience as an unfolding. And because it actually is unfolding, we tend to lean into it. We're with this moment in order for the next moment, in order for the next.

Can you relate to this? That leaning into what's next.

At a certain point, I realized that this is exactly what the Buddha was talking about

when he talked about the second kind of craving. The craving for sense pleasures is obvious, but then the Buddha talked about craving for becoming. And I realized: yes, this leaning into the unfolding is really craving for becoming.

We're here, but we're wanting this moment *in order for* the next moment—as if the next moment will

suddenly bring the resolution of everything. Even though the last ten million past moments have not. You'd think we would know it by now, but we don't. We keep thinking the next moment will resolve everything, or the next, or the next. And that is being caught on the wheel of samsara, the wheel of becoming.

When we see this, the practice—and this is something you can really work with—is to pay attention to that feeling of leaning into the unfolding, and then just drop back.

I'll give you an example. One of the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a very useful teaching, is: check the attitude in the mind. With whatever's happening, what's the attitude in the mind about it?

At one point I was just sitting here in the hall, simply feeling my breath. Completely simple—just feeling the breath, in and out and in and out. If you had asked me, "Is there any craving in this moment?" I would have said no, it's just feeling the breath. But then I remembered to ask that question: what's the attitude?

It was so interesting. Simply by asking the question—it wasn't even about the answer—simply by asking, "What's the attitude?" I could feel my mind relax back from a wanting that I didn't even know was there. In retrospect I saw that yes, I was with the breath in the most subtle way *in order to* get concentrated, *in order for* more calm. That slight leaning into becoming. Just by asking the question, I could feel the relaxation.

That moment is very instructive. This is a powerful refinement of the practice, because we can be quite mindful and quite concentrated in the unfolding and still be missing this craving for becoming.

As we've said in the hall a number of times, only six things are ever happening anyway. So what do we think the next moment is going to bring? It's just going to be another sensation, another sound, another thought. That's all that's ever going to arise. But our conditioning for craving is very strong.

One of the great beauties of dharma practice—and it's why it's so compelling, obviously compelling to all of you because you're here for this length of time—is that it opens us to so many different levels of who we are. It opens us to discernment of the kinds of thoughts we're having, to the different emotions, to seeing which are afflictive and which don't cause suffering. It opens us to our bodies in so many different ways, feeling the different levels of the energetic system. It opens us to all the hindrances, and to the most subtle levels—like this subtle level of craving.

When we see that, there's ease in that moment of settling back, even if just for a moment. It's not something we should think, "Okay, now I've got it."

Just another story: I was on retreat at the Forest Refuge, reflecting on the Four Noble Truths. Craving is the cause of suffering. So I said, "Joseph, just stop it. If craving is the cause of suffering, just stop craving." It seemed so simple. It was just so funny because I really thought, "Okay, got it." And of course, a minute and a half later: "Oh, I wonder what's for lunch."

So it takes practice.

Conceit really is any form of "I am." Whether it's relative, whether it's comparing, whether it's what you described—just that sense of imagining how other people are perceiving you—I think that can all be classified as mana.

A couple of things, and Bonnie may have mentioned this in her talk, but I found mana one of the most interesting things to keep an eye out for. First, know that as the defilements go, this is the last to be uprooted. Mana is not uprooted until arahantship. So even after the view of self is uprooted, even after all desire and aversion is uprooted—which is pretty big in itself—this habit of "I am" is still there.

So first, make friends with it, because it is going to come up in a lot of different ways. At this point in my practice, I am delighted every time I see it. I see mana arise, and I just smile. First, because I'm glad to see it. I'd rather see it than not see it. *Ah, there you are.*

Second, when I see it, the seeing of it is enough. You don't have to do anything about it. Because in the seeing of it and being mindful of it, it's there and it's gone. It's impermanent like everything else. But in the seeing of it, each time I feel, "Okay, now I'm working on arahantship." Because this is the defilement. So that kind of makes me excited.

It's really helpful to emphasize the delight aspect in the mind from seeing the defilements rather than getting caught in judgment—either a judgment about them or a self-judgment about the fact that they're arising, which is just another way of sinking back into the morass. In the Buddhist texts, very often the comment will be, "Mara, I see you." I love that line. So every time mana arises, whatever form it is—ah, I see you.

It's totally delightful that you're all here, because this is such a great thing to be doing, even if you don't feel that all the time, which I'm sure you don't. There's a lot. We're just opening to the whole show. Some is easeful and some is really difficult; some is pleasant and some is unpleasant. But that is the practice—just the willingness to see it all. And it's tremendously liberating.

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