Creating a Concept of Self – Part One

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 57:36

So many aspects of the Buddha's teachings about the nature of suffering and the possibilities of freedom resonate with our own common sense understanding of things: the importance of non-harming as the foundation for living together, whether locally or globally; the understanding that all things in our lives are changing, and that if we cling to or grasp at that which in its nature changes, we suffer. These principles are not hard to understand, at least intellectually, even if it takes practice to realize them.

But there's one aspect of the Buddha's teaching that is really counter-intuitive, that offers a profoundly different way of understanding ourselves and the world. It's one that challenges our entire worldview. This is the deep understanding and realization of selflessness—anattā—emptiness of self, the insubstantiality of all aspects of our experience.

Realizing selflessness, realizing anattā, is the great liberating jewel of the Buddhist teachings. As our mindfulness and awareness of this mind-body process grows more stable and more precise, we find that the self, what we think of as the self, is not what we thought it to be. We begin to understand that the body is not self, that thoughts and emotions are not self, that even awareness or consciousness is not self. Gradually, as we settle into the practice, we begin to see that the self is a concept, a mental construct, a fabrication of our minds.

Sometimes when people even hear about this—no self—it may feel a little scary or create a little anxiety, imagining that somehow when this realization deepens, we go up in a puff of smoke and suddenly disappear. The mind can conjure up all sorts of ideas about what this understanding entails. But the experience of selflessness can actually come as a bit of a surprise, because it's so counter to our usual way of understanding things, and it can also come as a great relief. All those troubling aspects of our personality, and also all the good qualities—they don't belong to anyone. They're all simply appearances arising out of certain conditions, certain causes, appearing when those causes and conditions are there, and disappearing when the conditions change.

It's precisely because all of these qualities of mind are not intrinsic to a core self that we're actually able to cultivate those which are wholesome and abandon those which are unwholesome. If these were some intrinsic part of ourselves, we'd be stuck in whatever habit patterns are present. All of this was summed up by one teacher in a very pithy phrase: no self, no problem. And that is really true.

Tonight I'd like to speak about how the mind creates this concept of self, this deeply held view that we have, and also how we can free ourselves from this great illusion.

The Abhidhamma, the collection of teachings of Buddhist psychology, provides a very detailed, precise analysis of the mind and all the qualities in the mind and all the elements of the body. This Buddhist psychology offers a very useful vocabulary and framework for understanding how the sense of self is created and how we can see through it.

The Abhidhamma describes the mind as the faculty of knowing. Mind basically means consciousness, the capacity to know—knowing sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, thoughts, ideas. In its most fundamental meaning, mind refers to consciousness, that which knows.

But what we usually refer to as mind also means something a little more expansive than simply consciousness, than simple bare knowing. In each moment of experience, different qualities of mind arise—which in Buddhist jargon are called mental factors. These are different mental qualities that arise in different combinations in every moment of knowing. In the knowing of a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, a thought, there's the bare knowing, which is consciousness, and then a variety of different mental factors in different combinations which color that moment of consciousness in a particular way.

The Buddha, with amazing clarity and brilliance, was able to see and recognize those factors of mind, those mental qualities which bring about happiness. He called those wholesome factors. He saw which mental factors arising in particular moments of consciousness create suffering, and he called those unwholesome. I find this very useful because it illustrates the pragmatic aspect of Buddhist ethics. What we're really doing is training in happiness. It's not a matter of following commandments. We see what factors bring about happiness—these are called wholesome—and we cultivate them. We see those which bring about suffering, and we learn to let them go.

So there's the simplicity of bare knowing consciousness, and in each moment this consciousness is colored by a variety of mental factors, sometimes wholesome, sometimes unwholesome.

There's one particular mental factor that is common to every moment of consciousness, always arising in every moment. It plays such an important role in the unfolding of our lives that the Buddha singled out this factor, along with vedanā—feeling tone—to be one of the five aggregates. When the Buddha was describing the totality of our experience in terms of the five aggregates, he singled out this one particular mental factor, made it its own aggregate, illustrating its importance. This is the mental factor of perception. The function of perception, the role that it plays in our minds, is to recognize, name, and remember each arising object.

So, for example, we hear a sound. Consciousness simply knows hearing—consciousness is just bare knowing. Perception picks out the distinguishing marks of that sound, and we name it "bird." We create a concept for it; we store it in memory. The next time we hear that sound, it's perception which recognizes, "Oh, that's a bird."

So you can see how perception is really conditioning our whole understanding of the world we live in. It's

the way we construct and interpret our world through these concepts.

Perception can also happen on a pre-verbal level. Animals or infants, for example, may experience things through the sense doors and distinguish them and even remember them, but not necessarily have a word for them. So perception happens both on the verbal and pre-verbal level.

Just to reassure you, all of this is going someplace. This is just setting the stage. But it's important to set the stage to understand what follows.

When perception, this faculty of recognition, is balanced with mindfulness, it's like putting a frame around a picture. Why do we put a picture in a frame? In order to focus our attention so we can see the picture more clearly. The point is not to look at the frame. The point is to direct our minds towards the picture.

In the same way, when perception is in the service of mindfulness—and mental noting is really a function of perception, we're naming the experience with a simple note—that mental note, that perception, the point of it is to frame the experience so that we can be more mindful. It's focusing our attention on the nature of what's arising.

Here's where it gets interesting. When there is perception without mindfulness, which is our usual way of being in the world, we know and remember only the superficial appearance of things. We give a name or a concept to what arises, and then, without mindfulness, our experience becomes limited by that concept. It's like we're looking at the frame instead of the picture.

There are countless examples of this. A very simple one: go outside, look at a tree, we recognize it as a tree, we think that we're seeing a tree. But the eye does not see a tree. Tree is a concept—a useful one. The eye sees color and form. But we are so used to experiencing the world through the lens of our concepts. We recognize "tree," name it a tree—"Oh, look at that tree over there"—and we think that we're actually seeing it. And we are, in a superficial way. If we use the concept "tree" to focus our attention to really see, to really look, there is a whole world of experience that can be revealed: light and shadow and components. But that's only if we don't get seduced by the concept.

Here's another example of how concepts can limit our understanding. The son of a friend of mine was in grade school—it might have been second grade or first grade—and the teacher asked the class, "What color are apples?" My friend's son said, "White." The teacher said, "No, apples aren't white. Apples are red, or they're green, or they're golden." But this young boy was insistent: "No, no, no, apples are white." And the teacher was insistent: "No, no, they're red or green."

This went on for a while, and then, with great frustration, the young boy said, "When you cut open an apple, what color is it?" Of course, the inside of all apples—well, most apples anyway—is white. But we can get so caught by a superficial perception that we're not actually open to another view, and sometimes a deeper view.

So our perceptions, our concepts about what we're experiencing, this overlay on experience, very often condition how we feel about that experience. And one of the startling things about all this is that often our perceptions are inaccurate—and yet they're conditioning the experience we're having.

I'll give you two examples of this. One happened to me, and this is a story I've told many times, but it's so striking. It was the first time Sayadaw U Pandita came to teach here. This was 1984.

It was a very intense retreat. He's a very demanding teacher, and we were practicing really hard—he's big on heroic effort. So I was doing walking meditation just outside in front of the building, and I glanced up and saw him looking down at me walking. Lift, move—I started walking really slowly. I'm walking back and forth, and I glance up again and he's still looking. It feels a little strange to me, but I'm pretending to be diligent, all the while thinking, "Why is he watching me?"

This went on for some time, and then at a certain point I just stopped and looked up—and it wasn't Upandita at all. It was a lampshade. I had created this whole world with quite a lot of anxiety, all because of a concept.

Another time, a friend told me this story. They were building a house in the woods, and as they were constructing it, they saw some great blue herons flying around—such beautiful birds. Then the house was finally built, and they moved in and heard this chirping in the basement. They got all excited. Somehow they thought there was a nest with little blue heron chicks chirping away, and it made them so happy. Then one day they had some repairs done. Somebody came, went into the basement, came up and said, "You know your smoke alarm is broken." The chirping was just a broken smoke alarm. All of a sudden, the very same sound became so irritating, and they had to immediately fix it. It was exactly the same sound. One concept led to one experience; a different concept led to a different experience. This is happening all the time in our lives.

Now, I'd like to point out that these are kind of simple and in some way trivial examples, but the power of concepts plays a tremendously powerful role both in our own lives and in the world. Without attention to them, concepts can sometimes be the cause of tremendous suffering. This is not an insignificant aspect of the Dharma.

I want to mention some of the concepts that play such a critical role in our lives. Consider concepts of place. The world is divided into all these countries and states. How many wars, how many people have been killed over boundaries? The Earth has not created boundaries—these boundaries are mental constructs. It's very striking: those of you who can remember when the first astronauts went into space, many of them had an almost mystical experience about seeing the Earth as a whole from outer space. They all described it as this most beautiful, unified planet. And yet we create concepts, create these boundaries, and kill each other over them.

Concepts of ideology. It's tragic how slogans—ideological slogans—can stir up so many people, sometimes

in very violent ways. Just ones that are in the news over recent years: from one side, some countries are "the axis of evil"; from the other side, "the great Satan." These are slogans, ideologies, concepts that get put out, and millions of people get caught up in the emotions around them.

Concepts of ownership and possessiveness. This is a really interesting one. What does it mean to own something? Mark Twain, the great American humorist, once wrote a short story about horse traders in Russia, but he told the whole story from the horse's point of view. The horses never thought for a moment that they were owned by anyone. They were in relationship to various human beings—some kind, some cruel—but the idea of being owned did not arise at all.

Yet sometimes huge suffering comes about from investment in this concept. We look at the legacy of slavery in this country, the effects of colonialism—the idea that a person or a country can own other people or own another country. Now we see the effects of this still in the suffering and conflicts going on in this country and around the world.

Or on a much simpler level, if you think this is just out there somewhere, I'd like you to do a little imaginative exercise now. Imagine walking into the hall and finding somebody sitting in your seat. There would probably be a moment. You might not shoot them, but I'll bet there would be some kind of reaction in the mind: "What are they doing in my seat, in my place?"

So it goes very deep. The Buddha said we can't even be said to own this mind and body, much less anything else.

Now with all these concepts and further ones, I'm not suggesting that we do away with concepts or that concepts are bad, because all of these concepts have uses. We can use them skillfully. The concept of ownership can be useful, or the concept of place. But we have to understand that they are constructs of our minds. They are not reflecting some underlying reality. When we understand that, we're not so attached to them and we can use them in a skillful and appropriate way.

The next concept I want to talk about has huge ramifications. If we could understand this one, I would say—I'm going to make up some number—but perhaps eighty percent of your suffering would be eliminated. Maybe seventy percent, but some significant amount. And that is the concept of time: the concept of past and future.

How is it that we experience the past? How is it that we experience the future? We're sitting or moving about, and we have certain thoughts—memories, recollections, remembrances. We put a concept on this class of thoughts, "past," and then with some mental gymnastics we take this concept and throw it back behind us, as if the past is actually back there. We do the same thing with future. We have certain kinds of thoughts—imagining, anticipating, worrying, planning. We have this class of thoughts, put a concept "future" on them, and with that same mental agility, throw the concept out ahead of us as if the future is out there waiting for us. All this time, we are not seeing that our experience of past and our experience of

future is happening as a thought in the present.

Now, I am not discussing the metaphysical nature of time. I'm talking about how we actually experience past and future. If we are lost in this construct, in this concept, it's as if we are carrying past and future as mountains on our shoulders going through life. How much of your day is spent lost in thoughts of past and future, with all the attendant feelings and emotions and everything that comes along with it? The concept of past and future is a huge burden we carry when we don't see that the actual experience is simply a thought in the moment. A thought in the moment is very light. It just arises and passes.

This insight does not require thirty years of meditation to understand. It can be seen in a moment. Retreat is a very good place to investigate this. You might keep an eye out for time thoughts about the retreat. You're sitting or moving about, having a really hard day. "Oh my God, three more weeks, nine more weeks, whatever it is, I'll never make it." And you feel depressed and heavy. Or maybe you're having a great time, about to get enlightened any moment. "Only three more weeks—I wish I could be here a year." In both cases, what has happened? There was a thought in the moment. That's all it was. But we created a concept, a time concept about it, and then burdened ourselves with everything we've invested in that concept.

This is hugely liberating to see. It doesn't mean we ignore those thoughts we're calling past or those we're calling future. We engage with them in the appropriate way, but we actually see that they are just thoughts in the moment. And so our engagement with them is immeasurably lighter. If past and future really exist, where are they? I think that's a good question to ask.

Now we're going to take this a step further, because it's not only time thoughts about past and future which are so prevalent and in which we get so lost—we also create a concept of present. This may seem strange, because so much of the instruction and teaching says, "Be present, stay in the present moment." But the present too is a concept. It's possible to practice being in the present, but with a kind of fixation to the present. The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa said, "Live, you say, in the present. Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality."

It's a beautiful expression of something the Buddha talked about in the Dhammapada, and this is a very profound instruction. This is an instruction that could transform your entire practice. So take it in.

Let go of the past. Okay. Let go of the future. Okay. Let go of the present, and cross over to the further shore. With the mind wholly liberated, you go beyond birth and death.

This could be a very interesting place to explore in your practice. When you really are settled and in the present flow, just moment after moment, if it comes to mind, you might bring to mind: okay, let go of the present. What would that mental move be? It's a kind of letting go. It's basically letting go of clinging to the present. I call it channel zero—which is really the mind that is not clinging to anything at all. Not to concepts of place, of ownership, of ideology, not to concepts of time.

Another big category of concepts that you have been exploring and gaining a lot of insight into are all the concepts we have around self-images. We create a concept about ourselves, about who we are, and we present ourselves to ourselves in that way, and we present ourselves to the world in that way. And as soon as we have a self-concept, a self-image of any kind, it is already a limitation. It is already a contraction. It's as if we've poured ourselves into a mold and then wonder why we feel constricted.

It would be very helpful to keep an eye out for whatever particular self-images are arising, whatever self-concepts you're holding to. On retreat, one of the most common expressions of self-image is good yogi, bad yogi. When things are going well, I'm the world's greatest yogi. And when we're struggling, it's as if I've never meditated before—I'm the world's worst yogi. Then we get caught up in that self-assessment, and we project it onto others and think, oh, they're great yogis, or they're terrible yogis. Then we compare ourselves, and we're just lost in this world of self-image.

I really got caught by this in that first retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita in 1984. As I mentioned, it was a very intense time. People were practicing with tremendous determination. At a certain point, I noticed all the yogis who I thought were the really good yogis—they were moving so carefully—and I saw they had little notebooks, and they were writing things down. In my mind I thought, oh, Sayadaw gave them some secret instruction. He only gave it to the good yogis, and I must be a really bad yogi. I fermented in that for a while.

But then I noticed the yogis who I thought were being quite careless, who didn't look very mindful at all. And I saw they had notebooks too. So then I thought, oh, I must be such a good yogi that Sayadaw thinks I don't need one.

It was just at the end of the retreat that I found out Sayadaw didn't say anything about having a notebook. People were simply using them at different times to make notes about their meditation in order to report. It had no significance at all. And yet my concepts about it fed into this tendency to create a self-image and to compare.

That's just one example of innumerable examples. Keep an eye out. Really pay attention to whatever self-images you construct, you create, because they are simply a concept in the mind.

Concepts become limiting even about things that seem more fundamental, like age or culture or race. How old is your breath? Is anger or love or joy or delusion or mindfulness European or African or Asian or American? No, it has nothing to do with any of that. These are more fundamental realities.

Even the idea of race is a construct, seen to be a construct without any basis in science at all. It would be like creating the concept of race based on the color of one's eyes rather than the color of one's skin. There's no basis for that whole construct. And yet look at the immense amount of suffering that has been caused by people buying into that mental construct.

Now this is not to say that these concepts don't point to certain differences of experience. Because they do.

There are different cultures, and I feel very differently at seventy-two than I did at twenty-two. So there are differences that are experienced, but if we get caught by the concept about them, it solidifies the sense of who we are, and we miss or overlook the underlying commonalities of all our experience. We fix the sense of ourselves and we fix the sense of who others are, all through this attachment to concepts—not realizing that they are concepts and constructs.

The deepest conditioning and habit of mind, and the root cause of so much suffering in the world, is the attachment we have to the concept of self, to this mental fabrication. The idea—and often it is a felt sense—that there is someone behind experience to whom it's all happening. We create a reference point for all of our experience, and then we call that reference point self, I.

So how does this happen? Because right here, if we explore it, we can see how and why the sense of self is so strongly conditioned. We become attached to and identified with this notion of self because we are relying on a superficial perception. It's like looking at the tree and thinking we're seeing tree, not realizing the tree is a word in our mind. We get up in the morning, look in the mirror—there's Joseph, there's me, that's who I am—and then we don't look more deeply to actually see and experience what is really there.

An example that I think we've used at different times during the retreat is that of a rainbow. After a storm, a rainbow often appears and we see it and it's beautiful and we feel a certain delight. But if we have some strong mindfulness and wisdom, we not only see the rainbow, but we actually can see and understand the underlying reality of air and light and moisture—the conditions which create the appearance of rainbow. This allows us, when we see the underlying realities and not just the superficial perception, to delight in the joy of it, in the beauty of it, while at the same time not being attached to it, because we realize it is only an appearance.

So we might think of self—of Joseph, of each one of us—like a rainbow. There is a pattern to all the different conditions of mind and body that are coming together moment after moment, and we can recognize the pattern, we can name it, we can use a concept, and it's fine to use the concept self. But we don't want to become misled into believing that that concept refers to something underneath the appearance. And this is precisely our exploration in meditation: going beyond the appearance to see and experience all the changing elements of this mind and body. We really see, moment after moment, what it is that's actually arising.

So the question can arise: on the level of rainbow, or the level of self, we are seeing that, we are seeing the rainbow—is it real? Is the rainbow real?

One Tibetan teacher expressed a response to this question really clearly, with regard to the question of whether the self is real. He said, "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. But you think you're really real. You exaggerate it."

I love that. We are real and we interact in all the conventional ways we do. That's not wrong. But we're not

really real in the way we think we are. And the practice of meditation is to open the doorway to that understanding.

How much of our sense of self comes from a superficial perception of the body? Our first response to "Who are you?" is often "This is me, this is who I am"—and we point to our bodies, because the body seems so solid and real. So in sitting, or in moving about, begin to notice how frequently we overlay our experience of the body with certain concepts: shoulders, back, arms. But we never feel the back. We never feel the arm or the shoulders. There is no sensation called shoulder. There is no sensation called arm. What we're feeling is tightness or pressure or lightness or vibration. That's our actual experience.

But so habitually we overlay that experience with a concept and then identify: my shoulder, my back, my arm. How often would you say "my tightness" or "my pressure"? That hardly ever comes up. And yet very commonly we say, "Oh yeah, my shoulder, my back." For conventional purposes this is fine, but it is misleading. Because the concepts we use don't change—back today, back yesterday, back tomorrow. And because the concept doesn't change, we think that there is some underlying reality that doesn't change. Yet as soon as we go beneath the concept to the actual felt experience, we see the body as a changing energy field. We have a very different relationship to this experience that we're calling body.

I want to reiterate that concepts can be useful. We can use them in the service of mindfulness. Just as an example, one of the instructions early in the retreat was to use the phrase "there is a body"—to use it sitting and moving about. So we're using the concept "body," but what is the actual experience you have? When you drop in with "there is a body" in sitting or moving, the experience becomes alive—we're actually feeling the body as sensations in space. The concept falls away because it has focused us in the actual experience of what's being felt. So concepts can be useful, but we have to see that they're only a pointing.

A strong sense of self also happens, as you know, when we become identified with thoughts and emotions, with all the internal stories that we tell about ourselves and about the world. We've talked so much over these weeks about really paying attention to the empty, insubstantial nature of thought. I find this to be one of the most freeing, immediate benefits of mindfulness of the mind—of thoughts—when we look directly not at the content of the thought, but at the nature of thought itself.

As different thoughts come, you might hold the question: what is a thought? When you look at it so directly, you see there's not much there. And yet when we don't see it so directly, we live in this mind-created world. It's as if we're living in the dream of our thoughts, with all of the emotions and reactions that come along with it.

There's a story of a Zen hermit monk living in the mountains. He was a great artist and he lived in a cave. For whatever reason, he spent years painting in great detail a tiger on the wall of the cave. He was such a great artist and did it with such precision that when he finished, he looked at it and got frightened.

I love the mental note: painted tiger. When you're caught up in some story, in some train of thought, in some big drama, you might make the note "painted tiger." It's just thoughts arising in the mind, and if we can see them in that way, we're not creating a sense of self by identifying with them. The thoughts come and go, we learn from them whatever we need to learn, but there's no contraction, no constriction, no creation of self in those thoughts.

I'd like to end with a reading that is somewhat confessional, because it comes from one of my favorite genres—mysteries and spy books. But you never know where wisdom comes from. Generally these genres are looked down upon, however, I'd like to share some wisdom from a book called *Bangkok Tattoo* by John Burdett. It's about a Buddhist detective.

These are my closing remarks:

"You see, dear reader, speaking frankly and without any intention to offend, you are a ramshackle collection of coincidences held together by a desperate and irrational clinging. There is no center at all. Everything depends on everything else. Your body depends on the environment. Your thoughts depend on whatever junk floats in from the media. Your emotions are largely from the reptilian end of your DNA. Your intellect is a chemical computer that can't add up a zillionth as fast as a pocket calculator."

And even your best side is a superficial piece of social programming that will fall apart just as soon as your spouse leaves with the kids and the money in your joint account, or the economy starts to fail and you get the sack, or you get conscripted into some idiot's war.

To name this amorphous morass of self-pity, vanity, and despair "self" is not only the height of hubris—it is also proof, if any were needed, that we are above all a delusional species. We are in a trance from birth to death.

Prick the balloon and what do you get? Emptiness.

Take two steps in the divine art of Buddhist meditation and you will find yourself on a planet you no longer recognize. Those needs and fears you thought were the very bones of your being turn out to be no more than bugs in your software.

Yes. So you could think of our practice as debugging the software.

So let's sit.

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