Cutting Through Identification with Consciousness

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 53:07

Last week I spoke of how different concepts—concepts of place, of ownership, of time, of self-image, even concepts of age and of race—condition the way we experience our reality. We live largely in the realm of our concepts, and to a large extent they overlay most of our experience.

We also discussed how the concept of self, which is the root cause of so much suffering in our lives—not only in our own lives but in the world—arises out of a superficial perception of our experience, a superficial perception of this mind and body. Guy elaborated on this quite beautifully in his talk on the five aggregates, on the emptiness of the aggregates.

The importance of understanding this is highlighted in a teaching by the great Tibetan master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. It really points to the heart of what we are doing here. He said, "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others too."

So that's our challenge, that's our task, and that's our practice.

Tonight I'll continue the discussion from last week of how the sense of self is created and how it's possible to free ourselves from this illusion, from this mistaken perception.

We talked about how the sense of self arises when we identify with the body, taking this body, as we usually do, to be I, to be mine. Who am I? This is who I am. It's our first and initial response. We talked about how we create the felt sense of self every time we get lost in or are identified with the thoughts in our minds—all the many stories we tell to ourselves, about ourselves, about the world.

We also create a strong sense of self when we identify with emotions and moods. This is where I left off last week. It's that strong felt sense: I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm discouraged, I'm excited. And the list goes on and on. Then we go even further. We go from "I'm happy" or "I'm sad" or "I'm depressed" or "I'm excited" to "I'm a happy person," "I'm a depressed person," "I'm a sad person." We build a whole superstructure of self on top of momentary changing conditions.

These emotions and mind states are often the most seductive aspect of our experience. It's what we most easily personalize. Even when we can get a sense, at least at times, that thoughts come and go and they're pretty fleeting, when there's a strong emotion in the mind, we often get very hooked by it, very identified

with it. We take what's non-self to be self—one of the distortions or hallucinations of perception that Bonnie spoke of. We don't see that each of these emotions or mind states is arising out of particular conditions at certain moments, stays for a while in its various transmutations, and then passes away when the conditions change.

We don't see, when we're caught up in it, that it is love that loves. It's fear that fears. It's joy that joys. It's anger that angers. Each emotion arising out of particular conditions comes into being, expresses its own nature, and passes away. The "I" and "mine" are quite extra. We're adding that to this experience.

One way of beginning to break this very deeply habituated pattern of identification is to see repeatedly, over and over again, their impermanent conditioned nature. The Buddha spoke very directly to this. It was a very direct teaching. He said, "So indeed, these states, not having been, come into being. Having been, they vanish."

Regarding these states, here are the pith instructions: regarding these states—all of these emotions—abide unattracted, unrepelled, independent, non-attached, free, not identified, with a mind free of barriers.

Simple.

I love that line: not having been, they come to be; having been, they vanish. Who among you has not experienced that? This is not some esoteric truth that requires thirty years of practice to discover. We all know this. These emotions, these mind states—not having been, they come into being; having been, they vanish. We've been through this countless times. But we don't often reflect on this truth. We don't remind ourselves of it in the midst of some strong emotion. We become so seduced by the story and the feeling state that we lose sight of their impermanent nature.

It might also be helpful to distinguish moods from emotions so that we can recognize and be mindful of their difference, seeing each of them more clearly. There's a well-known psychologist named Paul Ekman who did extensive research on facial microexpressions. He was able to read the emotions occurring just by watching the often unconscious microexpressions that people made in conversation. In his book *Emoti ons Revealed*, he makes an interesting distinction between moods and emotions that I thought would be useful to share, as it can help us distinguish the two and open up perhaps a new arena of mindfulness.

He says, "This is a good place to distinguish emotions from moods. All of us have both of them, but they are different. The obvious difference is that emotions are much shorter than moods. Moods can last a whole day, sometimes two days, while emotions can come and go in a minute, sometimes seconds. A mood activates specific emotions. When we are irritable, we are seeking an opportunity to become angry." That's interesting—to really see how moods can activate or condition an emotion. "When we are irritable, we are seeking an opportunity to become angry. We interpret the world in a way that permits or even requires us to become angry. Another way moods differ from emotions is that once an emotion has begun and we have become aware of it, we can usually point to the event that caused it. Rarely do we know why

we are in a mood. It just seems to happen to us."

I found it very interesting in my practice to begin checking in with the often unnoticed moods in the mind. They're much more amorphous than emotions, more ephemeral. They're often a background filter through which we view and relate to the world. Yet if we're not aware of them, they really condition our experience.

It takes a light touch to become mindful of moods. Because they're so ephemeral, we need to be very receptive. It's as if we settle back and open up and simply hold the question: what's the mood in the mind now? What's the general color tone of the mind? Not looking too hard. If we look too hard and try to find it too precisely, we look right through it to some experience. It's actually quite enjoyable to check this out at different times during the day. What's the mood now in my mind? And we remind ourselves that the mood, too, is impermanent and not self.

The thing is, we usually overlook this because we're waiting in our practice for some big emotion to become mindful of. In a way, we're intensity junkies. We like the intense experience, whether it's intense dukkha or intense sukha—that's what excites us. Moods are much softer and therefore often overlooked. But it would be interesting to include the mindfulness of moods in your field of awareness.

Sometimes I think of moods like cloud formations in the sky. Some cloud formations are heavy and gray and oppressive, and some are light and fluffy and airy. They make us feel different ways. But they're all just formations arising out of particular conditions. The conditions change, the clouds dissipate. Our moods and emotions are just like that, and it's helpful to remember and reflect on their impermanence. Can you even remember what mood you were in two weeks ago? Or one week ago? Or two days ago?

You know, when we look back, we already know how transitory our moods are. And yet when they come and we're not mindful, we can be so caught up in them, so influenced and conditioned by them. We become imprisoned in the view of self. "I'm feeling this way."

What's interesting is that as we begin to experience all of these changing phenomena in the body, of thoughts, of moods and emotions, we can see that there is a recognizable pattern to the unfolding. We wake up in the morning, we look in the mirror, and we recognize that person—looks familiar. It's not to deny that there's a pattern to this process, that things are unfolding in a lawful way, not in a chaotic way. Because of this, this arises. Because of this, this arises.

But the great insight, the liberating insight into selflessness, is the understanding that there is no one behind the process to whom it's happening. There's no core, central element that is "I." And yet, as we've mentioned many times in different talks, our habitual tendency is to refer everything back to this concept that we've created, this concept, this fabrication of self. My body. I'm thinking. I'm angry. I'm sad. I'm happy. Everything refers back to the self.

And then people often come into the practice with great determination to get rid of the self. They hear

these teachings and they see that the whole problem is self—I need to get rid of it. I have very good news for you: you don't have to get rid of the self, because it is not there in the first place.

There was a writer—I think he was English or Irish—who lived in Hong Kong for a long time. He wrote under the name of Wei Wu Wei. Clearly from his writings, he had some profound experience of emptiness and selflessness. He wrote many books, and most of them just contain short aphorisms, very pithy statements of wisdom. I want to read a few of them to help relieve you of the burden of thinking that you need to get rid of yourself.

The first one is called "The Goose": *Destroy the ego. Hound it. Beat it. Snub it. Tell it where it gets off. Great fun, no doubt. But where is it? Must you not find it first? Isn't there a word about catching your goose before you cook it? The great difficulty here is that there isn't one.*

We need to relax into that understanding.

Another one of his little gems: *Whoever thinks that they exist objectively is like a dog barking up a tree that isn't there.* That's a great image—we're barking up this tree that isn't there.

And a last one: *What is the use of trying to climb out of a hole we have never been in?*

Our practice takes on a whole different tenor when we approach it from this understanding. There's not something we have to get rid of. There's not this big bad ego that somehow is there and we have to obliterate it. Rather, it's the understanding that it's not there in the first place, and we simply have to see how we are creating the felt sense of self in any moment that we're identified with what's happening. That's what creates that felt sense of it, and it's strong. But it's nothing more than a moment of identification with some element of the mind and body. And the more insight we have—for example, into the three characteristics, or even simply into the flow of impermanence—moment after moment, that weakens the habit pattern of identification.

All of this, I think, can be understood relatively easily, even though it takes practice, with respect to the body, with respect to thoughts, with respect to moods, with respect to emotions. But the most subtle level of identification, and the most deeply rooted habit pattern of creating a sense of self, happens when we identify with the process of consciousness. When we are identifying with consciousness, with the knowing, then we're creating a sense of the observer, the witness, someone apart from experience who's knowing it all.

And even when we understand on some level that thoughts and feelings and emotions in the body are changing and impermanent, still we have the belief, "Well, I'm the one who knows all this." That could be said to be the last holdout of self. But through a growing mindfulness, through a growing wisdom, we see that consciousness and mindfulness and wisdom themselves are dependent on conditions. Consciousness, mindfulness, wisdom are all arising and passing in each moment.

I want to take a few moments to clarify some terms which often are confusing. In English, we use words as translations from the Pali, and in Pali, the terms are very specifically defined. But when they get translated into English—and perhaps other languages—the definitions sometimes are not so clear, and we can get confused.

The term consciousness refers to that knowing faculty. It's simply the faculty of bare knowing: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling, tasting, touching consciousness, consciousness of thought. One of my favorite examples of consciousness as being different than mindfulness—I may have mentioned this previously, but for me it's a wonderful image—are you familiar with Black Labrador Retrievers? For those of you who are not familiar, they're tremendously playful dogs. They are just having a great time, running and jumping and playing. It's great fun to be with them. They don't look very mindful, but they're not unconscious. They're knowing sights, particularly smells—they're knowing all these things. Consciousness is there. And I hope I'm not slandering them by saying they're not being mindful—it just doesn't look like it.

So mindfulness is something different than consciousness. Consciousness is just knowing the sense objects. Mindfulness—we can almost say mindfulness knows that we know. It's another level of knowing, knowing that the object is present. A very good experiment that reveals clearly in your experience the difference between consciousness and mindfulness is to pay attention to those moments when you come out from being lost in a thought. When the mind is thinking and we're lost in the thought, we are not unconscious—consciousness is there—but there is no mindfulness. And yet in the moment, and we have these countless times a day, we're lost, lost, lost in a thought, and then in a certain moment we become aware that we're thinking. Highlight that moment. Because right in that transition from being lost in a thought to being aware that you're thinking, right there the quality of awareness, the quality of mindfulness, is illuminated.

So then what's wisdom? Consciousness is just that bare knowing. Mindfulness is another level in which we know what the object is—we know that we're knowing. We might say that wisdom is what we learn from being mindful. Mindfulness brings us, as was mentioned, face to face with the object. So we're mindful or aware of sights and sounds and thoughts and emotions and moods. Mindfulness is the methodology of wisdom. We're mindful—what are we learning?

I think this is a really important question, especially given the widespread application now of mindfulness in our society. It's quite amazing. Mindfulness has become mainstream, and it's extraordinary. But mindfulness itself, although very beneficial on many levels, is not wisdom. Mindfulness brings us there. It brings us here to the moment. And then what are we learning? Of course, all of the Buddhist teachings are really an elaboration of what we learn when we're being mindful. We learn that everything is impermanent, and because of that, ultimately unreliable. We learn the selfless nature of things.

We learn the Four Noble Truths, how attachment leads to suffering. And this is not theoretical.

Mindfulness actually lets us see all this in our own experience.

So that's a slight definition of terms: consciousness, knowing, mindful awareness, wisdom. Coming back now to how do we cut through the identification with knowing? How do we stop creating and living our lives from this place of being the knower, the observer, the witness?

This is a very challenging aspect of the practice—how to cut through identification with knowing, with consciousness. And there are different methods depending on the perspectives we have in our experience.

I want to use a little analogy which describes two different kinds of perspectives that we often have. You're probably familiar with the understanding in physics that depending on how it's observed, light can be seen either as a particle or as a wave. Seen in one way it's a particle, seen in another way it's a wave. And unlike light, this is the full extent of my knowledge of physics. But that example has been very helpful because in meditation, sometimes we are experiencing the particle-like nature of experience, and sometimes we're experiencing more the wave-like or field-like nature of experience. Both of these perspectives happen at different times, and we can cut through the identification with knowing, with consciousness, in each of these perspectives.

When we're experiencing things in their particle-like nature, what we're seeing is that in each moment there is knowing and an object. I move my arm—there's the sensations of the movement and the knowing of them. There's a sound and the knowing of it, a sight and the knowing of it, a thought and the knowing of it. As we're paying attention moment after moment, we can begin to experience that in every moment this is what's happening. It's a pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

There are stages of insight, and one stage is called purification of view. This is precisely the view that is purified. It's the beginning understanding of selflessness—that there's not a self behind that process. All that's happening is this particle-like nature: knowing an object arising and passing moment after moment. At first, we're making some kind of effort to see this and to understand it. But as the momentum of mindfulness builds, the mindfulness of this pairwise progression of change is happening all by itself.

I want to read something from Ajahn Chah, a Thai master. He said, "At some point the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is simply seen as mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own."

It's as if we settle back into this process unfolding. There's no self to get rid of. There's nothing we have to get. There's nothing we have to become. We're simply settling back into the unfolding process that's happening all by itself. Knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. All is seen as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing.

This is helpful to practice, even if we practice it just for short periods of time. You might experiment—take a few minutes at a time and practice non-doing. Don't do anything. Don't be trying to do anything. Just settle back into the awareness of the already unfolding process. As we said, there are only six things that can be happening, so it's not that complicated. It's either a sight or a sound or a smell or a taste or a sensation or some mind object. Knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. And the whole process unfolds by itself.

This can have tremendously liberating consequences because we are experiencing the selfless nature of it. And this was again expressed beautifully from the Zen tradition by a Zen nun, the abbess of a monastery. Her name is Teijitsu.

She saw that experiences arose, abided, and fell away—that's what we're seeing all the time. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this. No ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind—I love that phrase, opened the clenched fist in her mind—and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

Do you see the difference in your practice between trying to get and settling back, letting this already empty process simply unfold? As the Thai master Ajahn Buddhadasa said, "There's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have."

Sometimes we settle back and we're seeing this particle-like nature—just arising and passing, arising and passing—and at a certain point it's all just going on by itself. But sometimes our experience reveals itself not so much as particles but more as a field. It's as if there's a field of awareness in which things are arising and vanishing. This is a little trickier in terms of not identifying with the field, with the field of knowing.

This is from the teachings of Mahasi Sayadaw, who was one of the great Burmese masters and the grandfather of one of the great lineages. He's describing how this mindfulness practice unfolds, and at different stages we're experiencing things in different ways. Sometimes, as I said, it's as particles, things arising and passing. Sometimes it's more like a field.

He said, "At times there is nothing to notice, with the body disappearing and the sense of touch lost. However, at this moment, knowing consciousness is still apparent. In the very clear open space of the sky, there remains only one very clear blissful consciousness, which is very clear beyond comparison and very blissful. The yogi tends to delight in such clear blissful consciousness. But the consciousness is not going to stay permanent. It too has to be noted as knowing, knowing"—whether it's noting with the word or just noticing.

So we need to become mindful even of that great, vast, spacious field of knowing. We need to be mindful of it so as not to be identified with it.

There was a great Thai master, Ajahn Maha Boowa, who is reputed to be an arahant, fully enlightened. And he is rare in that he actually described the moment of his awakening and the insight that completely freed his mind. I want to read this account of his final liberation. It happened to him—here's our chance.

"Once when I went to practice at this one particular temple, the problem of unawareness or ignorance had me bewildered for quite some time. At that stage, the mind was so radiant that I came to marvel at its radiance. Everything of every sort which could make me marvel seemed to have gathered there in the mind, to the point where I began to marvel at myself. Why is it that my mind is so marvelous? Looking at the body, I couldn't see it at all"—just as Mahasi Sayadaw described—"it was all space, empty. The mind was radiant in full force. This radiance is the ultimate counterfeit, and at that moment it's the most conspicuous point. You hardly want to touch it at all because you love it and cherish it more than anything else. In the entire body there is nothing more outstanding than this radiance, which is why you are amazed at it, love it, cherish it, dawdle over it, wanting nothing to touch it—but it's the enemy king, unawareness.

"But luckily, as soon as I began to marvel at myself, to the point of exclaiming deludedly without being conscious of it, 'Why has my mind come so far?'—at that moment a statement of Dhamma spontaneously arose. This too I hadn't anticipated. It suddenly appeared as if someone was speaking in the heart, although there was no one there speaking. It simply appeared as a statement: 'If there is a point or a center of the knower anywhere, that is an agent of birth.'"

That's what it said. So in the midst of this amazing radiance that we love and that we cherish and that we've practiced for—if there is a point or a center of a knower anywhere, that is an agent of birth, of continuing samsara.

This is the critical point in our practice. As long as there is identification with anything at all, we are still in the realm of conventional conditioned reality. So how do we cut through? In this experience of mind or awareness or consciousness as this radiant field, which can be so seductive and blissful—how do we cut through?

How do we cut through identification with that?

In some Tibetan and Zen traditions, they have some very useful tools. One teaching suggests that we look for the mind. Look for the knowing mind. Can you find it? When we look for what's knowing, there's nothing to find. And as one teacher said, the not finding is the finding.

I like to do this sometimes in listening, because that's very effortless. Sitting and sounds are arising, and sometimes I'll pose the really unspoken question: can I find what's knowing the sound? It's clear that there's a knowing of it, but can I find what's knowing? In that looking for the mind and seeing there's nothing to find, it's a moment of cutting through any identification with anything, because there's nothing to find.

This is expressed in a very famous Zen exchange, a dialogue between Bodhidharma, who brought Buddhism from India to China, and the person who was to become his first disciple, Huike.

Huike says, "Please teach me the Dharma of all the Buddhas."

Bodhidharma says, "The Dharma seal of all the Buddhas cannot be obtained from someone else."

And you can feel the yearning and the anguish. It's said that Huike had waited outside three days in the snow for Bodhidharma to come teach him. He said, "My mind is distressed. Please pacify it with your teaching."

Now before I go on, this whole dialogue has a kind of Zen witticism to it, but that's not the point. There's a very profound teaching here, so see if you can take it in in that way.

Huike says, "My mind is distressed, please pacify it with your teaching."

Bodhidharma says, "Present me your mind, and I will pacify it."

Huike says, "I've searched for my mind, but I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There, I've pacified it."

When we see that—when we look for our minds and can't find it—it's already pacified.

I've used this dialogue often, not even on retreat. I can just be in my life and maybe caught up in some drama or other, and I realize that there's some tension or some suffering going on. Because I'm so familiar with the dialogue, all I need to remind myself is: already pacified. In that moment the whole thing disappears because it cuts through the identification with the knowing, with consciousness. I've looked for it everywhere and I can't find it. It's like that moment—there, already pacified. It's already done.

The Buddha gave some very specific and profound teachings to his son, Rahula, who ordained as a novice when he was a young boy, and then at twenty ordained as a full monk. This is the Buddha teaching his son. This teaching gets to the heart of everything we're doing and practicing. He said to Rahula, "Every aspect of mind and body should be seen with perfect wisdom. This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

We can use these words, these teachings of the Buddha to his son, as a kind of mantra of liberation. Whatever is arising, moment after moment—whether it's something in the body, in the thoughts, in emotions, in moods, in consciousness, awareness itself—this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.

And it's said in the sutta that whoever understands this, that nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine—whoever understands, whoever realizes this—has understood and realized all the teachings. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. This is what we're practicing.

We are actually practicing the mind of freedom, and we can do it moment after moment. We forget, we get carried away and get lost, but then we come back and begin again. I think it's very helpful to keep connected, even as we're going through our practice, to the actual potential for liberation in this moment, even if it's for just a moment. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine.

A surprising consequence of this—and Carol spoke really beautifully about this last night—is that through a growing understanding of selflessness, emptiness of self, we also develop a growing sense of connection. Because on the deepest level we realize there is no one there to be separate.

Again from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "When we recognize the empty selfless nature of phenomena, when we realize the empty selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

When we see this, we understand that selflessness and love are the same thing.

And this is our practice.

Let's just sit and let the words go into that unfindable space.

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