Q & A

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:08:34

So any questions?

What is the role of hardship on the path, or its importance? Because it seems to be such an integral part of training—for example, in Ajahn Chah's approach.

In one way you could say that hardship is the total essence of the path, if you translate hardship as dukkha. All Four Noble Truths revolve around that—the experience of it, the cause of it, the ending of it, and the way.

Sometimes in thinking back to the practice conditions in Asia compared to the practice conditions here, there was a lot of relative hardship, just in terms of everything. Of course, I was much younger then, so it was easier. But as you've probably experienced, external conditions do not have to be ascetic for hardships to arise, because there is the inevitable discomfort of the body and all the dukkha of the mind. So I don't think that much is lost in terms of the physical surroundings.

In whatever way we experience dukkha—certainly the physical discomfort, which is mostly what conditions in Asia were about, but which we also experience here just in our experience of the body—it teaches us a lot. It teaches us about patience. It teaches us about constancy and perseverance. It teaches us about selflessness, anattā, in that we see the body is ungovernable. We've talked a lot about this, the nature of the body. The nature of the elements is to express themselves in their own ways, and they often involve discomfort with a whole range of intensity.

In that sense, our relationship to discomfort—you could almost say that *is* the path, because it so clearly points out our own level of reactivity. As I mentioned the other morning, there's the Buddha's statement that as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. So our relationship to what's unpleasant, whether it's the physical surroundings and the kind of hardships that may have been there in Asia, or what we experience here—our relationship to that is the very essence of the path. Are we identified with it? Are we reactive to it? Can we be open to it as empty phenomena rolling on? Sometimes it's challenging. But for those of you who would like to explore that edge, there are always ways to do it, even in simple ways—following the eight precepts, perhaps sleeping less, things like that.

How do you pursue things with passion in life without becoming attached? My experience is that when I get really caught up in a project or something that's meaningful to me, the further I dig into it, there ends up being fear, greed, jealousy, arrogance. At the core it feels good and right, but then it turns into something

that becomes very sticky.

There's actually a very simple answer. One of the phrases Munindraji would often use about the practice—he said this so many times—was: "It's simple but not easy." So the response to that question is simple but not easy.

I first connected with this understanding when I was a freshman in college. I was taking a course in Eastern philosophy and didn't know anything—I had no knowledge at all about Buddhism or about anything. We were reading the Bhagavad Gita, one of the great Hindu classics. There was one phrase in the Bhagavad Gita that even as a sixteen or seventeen-year-old who didn't know anything, resonated so deeply. I think it was kind of a harbinger of the rest of my life. It said: "To act without attachment to the fruit of the action."

Again, I really didn't have any clear sense of what it even meant, but something resonated deeply. I think that is precisely how we can act passionately, with full engagement—to see whether there's attachment to the outcome. Because we can't control the outcome. So many elements and conditions go into how things are going to turn out, and what we're doing is just one part of it.

If we're not attached to the outcome, then I think a lot of those unwholesome states fall away. We're just there, doing what we're doing, motivated by as wholesome a motivation as possible, and it frees the mind from so many unwholesome elements that can come in.

So it's worth looking. This in itself is its own investigation. As we're engaged, are we attached to the outcome or not? To really look at that on all the various levels of subtlety. And to remind oneself that no matter how worthy the cause and how passionately engaged we are, how things will unfold is ultimately out of our control.

To act without attachment to the fruit of the action, to the result of the action. And that doesn't mean we don't have an aspiration for a result, but are we attached to it? That attachment, like any other attachment, is simply the cause of a lot of suffering.

A question arose about karma, which is really defined as volitional activity—the volition, depending on the motivation, will bring about a certain result. It's easy to see this in certain kinds of actions, but difficult to see either how it's working or how we can become aware of it with regard to thought, the intention to think.

I think there are two elements here. To the degree that we become more mindful of thought, the karmic impact of simply having the thought is very minimal. So it doesn't need to be an act of concern. If we're having thoughts in the mind, even if they're quite negative thoughts, but we're actually mindful of them, that's like a line drawn in water. It doesn't really have much impact or bring about much result. The results become more powerful if we're not mindful of the thought and we give expression to them, either in word or in action.

That having been said, I think you can relax, at least with regard to the content, if you're mindful. So that can be another little motivating force—can I be aware of the thoughts that are going through the mind? There are times, and perhaps you've experienced it, when the mind is very quiet and there's not much thinking going on. There are times when we can actually pick up the moment just before we're about to think. That's quite subtle, and as I say, it's not necessary in terms of our karmic unfolding.

This is really important because one of the very seductive ways that we're not mindful of thought is when we are judging or have aversion to the content of the thoughts that are arising. We all have different kinds of thoughts—some are wholesome and beautiful, and some are not. And a common tendency is to see those unwholesome thoughts and, instead of simply being mindful of thinking, the habitual tendency is to judge those thoughts, to judge ourselves for having them, to have aversion towards them. It's precisely that which keeps us from being mindful that it's just a thought.

So you really want to be careful not to be judging the unwholesome content of thoughts that arise in the mind. The liberating relationship to them is not in judging them or judging ourselves, but in recognizing: it's just a thought. It's like a sound arising and passing. That's why practicing seeing the emptiness of thought as a phenomenon is so important. The content of the thought takes on greater importance when we act on them. That's when we really want to discern the wholesome from the unwholesome.

Another question arose: teachers have talked about the distinction between desire that's unwholesome and desire that's wholesome, but there hasn't been much discussion about the distinction between aversion that's unwholesome and aversion that's wholesome.

How do we distinguish between wholesome aversion and unwholesome aversion? In the texts, there are many mind states, like in the Pali *hiri* and *ottappa*, which is often translated—a little awkwardly in English—as moral shame or moral dread, fear of wrongdoing. The problem is that as we translate from the Pali into English, we could imagine that phrase, "fear of wrongdoing," to equate with aversion, because mostly fear is an aspect of aversion.

But actually, those mind states are not aversion. They are wise discernment and proper response to discerning wisely. We recognize: this is unwholesome, and there is that pulling back from wanting to do it. But that's not an aversive mindset. That's actually wisdom. And that's why *hiri* and *ottappa*—moral shame, moral dread, conscience, self-respect, there are so many different ways to translate them into English—are called guardians of the world. Those two mental factors are a protection. That self-respect, that we actually respect ourselves enough not to want to do unwholesome things that will cause us suffering, and conscience about not harming others—that's a very different mind state than aversion.

This discernment is really important. We could call it wise aversion. The Dalai Lama, I've read in certain places, talks about a wise fear. If you go to the ocean and you see a sign that says "dangerous undertow," there's a kind of wise fear. This would not be such a good idea to jump in.

But it's not really the fear of aversion. It's discernment.

A question arose about what to do when the insight of impermanence is in excess—when we see how all conditioned things are unreliable as a source of happiness, and yet the insight of anattā is not fully realized. We're personalizing it. We see the insecurity of it all and it can be destabilizing.

This could be a whole hour's dharma talk, so I'll start with just an image that describes various stages of opening to the impermanent unreliability of phenomena.

The example used was someone jumping out of a plane who at first experiences the excitement of free fall. People pay money to do that! So the opening to the impermanence of everything, the breaking apart of the solidity of things, at first can be exhilarating. It's like a whole new world begins to open up. Can you imagine the excitement of the scientists who first looked through a microscope and saw a whole different world than the world of apparent perception? Exhilarating.

So the person jumps out excited, exhilarated—but then they realize they don't have a parachute. That's when the fear, the anxiety, the terror takes place. This is a stage we go through as we open to the fact that there is no solidity to anything, but we're still not completely realized in selflessness. There's a lot of destabilization, and it takes a certain tenderness in the practice at that time to allow one to enter into that stage of understanding with balance, with care, with knowing that it's a difficult time. You're realizing: uh-oh, no parachute. At those times, particularly having some good dharma friends or teachers to be supportive in the understanding—yes, this is a stage in practice, but it's not how things remain.

The next level of understanding: jumps out, exhilarated, uh-oh no parachute, fear, anxiety—but then the person comes to the realization there's no ground. So the fact that there's no parachute doesn't matter because there's not going to be a crash landing. That's when the mind comes to a place of great equanimity where it's just phenomena rolling on and the mind is completely non-reactive to that, actually in a place of great peace and calm. There are these stages manifesting in this insight into impermanence. That's one whole way of understanding it.

Another template for understanding our life and practice is that the path is really—and the Buddha described this in quite a bit of detail—the path of happiness. The Buddha described seven different kinds of happiness. Just as an aside regarding the subtleties of the Buddha's understanding: Munindraji once gave a three-hour talk on twenty-one kinds of silence.

So even though we're developing insight into impermanence and the Four Noble Truths and dukkha and all of that, and at times it can be very challenging, the Buddha talked about the happiness of ordinary sense pleasures. They do bring us happiness. They're not long-lasting, but he didn't deny that happiness. And he talked about the causes for that happiness to arise, which is generosity and sīla. So there's a path to that.

He talked about the happiness of concentration. When the mind is concentrated and really comes to a

place of stillness, that is a more fulfilling kind of happiness than the happiness of sense pleasures. We know that, even to a little extent. When you think of sense pleasures—no matter what they are, beautiful music, delicious food, passionate sex, mountain biking—we could enjoy the happiness of that for a couple of hours, for a day. Could you imagine having delicious food all day? Or listening to beautiful music for days on end? No. The capacity for the pleasure of even the most delightful sense pleasures is contained.

And yet Dipa Ma, this wonderful teacher, could sit in samādhi for three days. She could enjoy the happiness of that concentration. One time we were walking together in India and she turned to me and said, "You should sit for two days." She didn't mean a two-day retreat. She meant I should sit down and not get up for two days. I just laughed because it was unthinkable. She turned to me and said, "Don't be lazy."

Lest you have any projections, I did not sit for two days. But it is possible, and even to a lesser extent than that, we can experience the happiness of concentration for extended periods of time, which illustrates that it's a more fulfilling kind of happiness than the happiness of sense pleasures. And the Buddha talked about how to achieve that.

Then there's the happiness of insight, where we truly see with clarity the causes of suffering and manage, even for short periods of time, to unhook from a particular source of suffering. That's a tremendous source of happiness in our lives—to see that liberation is possible. And then there's the happiness of nibbana, the unconditioned. It just goes on and on.

So even as we're exploring the impermanence and instability, going through the various stages of that investigation, we don't want to lose sight of the fact that this whole path is a path of happiness. In our lives, we tune into that, and when we understand the causes for each of these kinds of happiness, we cultivate them. It's all of that.

A question came about three different expressions of concentration. One is khaṇika samādhi, momentary concentration, which we're really developing in vipassanā. There's access concentration, where the mind is in the neighborhood of jhāna, of absorption. And then there's the concentration of absorption itself. The question was whether these are different in nature or just different in intensity.

It's a little of both. Momentary concentration can get very strong. Sayadaw U Pandita—perhaps this was mentioned—really had a whole framework for understanding the stages of vipassanā. He called them vipassanā jhānas because at different stages in the development of insight, the level of concentration and the insights contained therein are analogous to the different jhānic states. So we shouldn't underestimate the strength of concentration that can arise in vipassanā, in momentary concentration.

In fact, access concentration, which technically refers to that neighborhood of jhāna, we can actually experience in vipassanā at that time when the concentration and mindfulness develop enough momentum that the practice is really going on by itself. We're not making a huge effort anymore to be mindful or to stay steady—it's happening naturally. This occurs in vipassanā, so there's an equivalent of

access concentration there.

And then there is the absorption of jhāna. The Buddha talked extensively about jhānic absorption. Among contemporary teachers, there is a wide range of interpretation of what that state actually is, and different teachers offer very different descriptions. There's a book by Richard Shankman simply called *Samadhi,* where he describes this range of interpretation among contemporary teachers of jhāna.

In one sense, that full absorption is different, but again, there's a range of interpretation. The quality of concentration is really the same. Concentration means steadiness of mind. The example the Buddha gave in the texts—or perhaps it's in the Visuddhimagga where concentration is described—is a candle flame in a windless place. It's just that steadiness where the flame isn't flickering. This quality is being developed in moment-to-moment mindfulness, and there are times when the mind becomes very, very steady.

Another question arose about the first precept. Someone shared that this summer they killed a deer tick out of some fear, and this had come up during the retreat. They'd been working with forgiveness practice and such. But what arose was thinking about those times when one seems to need to choose to kill—what is the discernment there?

This is such an important question. In living as laypeople in the world, we are going to come up against situations where it seems that, in consideration of the greater good, it's necessary to take a life. What do you do with malaria-carrying mosquitoes? There are so many examples.

What's important here, I think, is really looking as much as possible at the motivation in one's mind and fostering wholesome motivations. Now, it may be that in the actual moment of taking a life—this is a possibility—there actually is aversion in the mind, and that's what's motivating the action. But that aversion could be surrounded by compassion, by discernment, by wisdom, by thinking of the greater good.

This is just my interpretation, but I think the karmic consequences of something like that are very different than if one is killing out of greed or out of anger or out of hatred or out of delusion. It seems to me a very different situation.

Let me tell you a sad story. After college, I joined the Peace Corps, and that's where I went.

They sent me to Thailand to teach English, which is where I came into contact with Buddhism. So it was a great transforming event. But in Peace Corps training, first the training was in DeKalb, Illinois in the winter—to go to Thailand. So just weather-wise the training was way off. But then the last two weeks we spent at a Peace Corps training camp in Hawaii, in Waipio Valley on the Big Island. Beautiful.

But part of the training, and it's remarkable to me that it was part of it, was that they had us kill chickens. Not everybody, but that was part of it. Most of us were going to teach English. But I was twenty years old, and I remember in my mind—this is a perfect example of the power of delusion—I had the thought, "I'm a

man, I should be able to do this." That was the feeling. And even though there was a lot of distaste, I did it, and I had the picture of me proudly holding this dead chicken that I'd just killed.

Some years later, after the Peace Corps, I was in India doing intensive practice, and all of this came up. I mean, you think a deer tick is a problem. It's nothing. Not nothing, but... it was horrendous. I was just reliving that again and again. I was horrified at both how I could have done it and also the delusion out of which that action came. And I just sat with it. It was days, and it was a purification.

As I think was mentioned the other night, we've all done different unwholesome actions, and they do come up in the practice. But if we're able to be with it and to feel the remorse and the regret, it will have its own karmic consequences. Every time I get a neck pain, I think, "Okay."

And what's so interesting—what happened—did I tell the story? They would serve us, this was in Bodh Gaya, and I was practicing, and in the evening they'd serve just a very simple thing: tea and maybe a couple of chapatis and sometimes a hard-boiled egg. So in the midst of this coming up in my heart-mind in this incredibly vivid and distressing way, they serve that. I crack open the egg and there's an embryo. This is the only time ever in my life that that happened, and it should happen when that's what was coming up. It's a little weird, but who knows how these things happen.

So again, that's something done just out of total delusion. That seems to me very different than when it feels like we have to take an action that may, at the very heart of it, have an unwholesome aspect, but with as much discernment and as much compassion as we have, we undertake it.

Ethical issues I find tremendously interesting. This is why the precepts—really undertaking the precepts as a training and a practice in our lives—is tremendously powerful, because it often brings us right to the edge of ethical dilemmas. If we've taken a precept not to kill, or not to lie, sometimes things come up. In the early years I'd be teaching in Canada, and just the visa question—it was so easy to just come in. "Why are you coming?" "Oh, I'm going to visit friends." I just didn't have to deal with the whole visa process. But at a certain point, it just wasn't the right thing to do, even though it caused a lot of what to my mind was unnecessary trouble and hassle and sometimes expense. Just to be straight, to be impeccable.

And I find as a life practice, striving for impeccability—we may fall down many times, and that's why the Buddha takes it on as a training rather than as a commandment. So it's not like if we fall down from impeccability that somehow we're a bad person, or sinful. No, it's a training. But having that standard against which to train, I think, is just an incredibly rich part of Dharma practice in our lives.

Someone in the audience commented that she practices the precepts as a training, and it's never perfect, never done, ongoing—and that the one she finds hardest of all is wise speech. Because as we all know, we speak, they speak, everybody speaks. It's an ongoing thing in the world, constant. More so than not killing.

It's not like isolated activities. Most of us are speaking for a good part of every day, except when you're here—which is, enjoy it. You will miss it. But it's precisely because of that frequency that right speech as a

training can be an amazingly powerful practice of mindfulness throughout the day, because we are speaking a lot when we're off retreat.

To really pay attention to the motivation behind what we're about to say requires that we be attentive. And so to take that on—if we did that, just that, fully—I'm probably going to say something heretical here, but you probably wouldn't even need to sit in meditation. Because just that mindfulness of speech and really doing that throughout the day, taking it on, keeps us very mindful. I love that practice.

One of the parts of it that I really love is—you know, it's obvious and maybe a little bit easier to refrain from angry or harsh speech or lies, even though that can get subtle too. The one I really love to work with is useless talk. And the Pali word is perfect. The Pali word for useless talk is *samphappalāpa*. It sounds just like what it is—just samphappalāpa, samphappalāpa.

I love it because in a social gathering, a social situation, it's so easy. I see myself do this so often. We're just kind of hanging out with friends, and I can see an impulse arise in my mind just to say something that is totally useless, that really has no meaning at all. It's just a way of announcing, "Here I am"—as if people didn't realize that.

So I love it in those moments when I can see that impulse just to samphappalāpa, and I'm mindful enough to see it. No, I don't have to say this. It feels like this little victory over Māra. And it really feels like there's that sense of ease and letting go, kind of renunciate. We can taste the sweetness of renunciation in that moment. We're renouncing this useless speech. We just drop back into ease and silence.

The observation was raised that samphappalāpa in our culture is almost something you're expected to do—that you're sort of weird if you don't. Yes, yes. You cannot go to a party and sit totally weird in a corner. You've got to join. And that's the very funny point.

So the comment is that in our culture—and I think this is usual probably all over the world—social engagement often involves a lot of that. And so as a beginning undertaking, how about refraining from every fifth samphappalāpa? We don't have to create some kind of weird situation where we're never interacting on that level. But really take it in as a practice, recognizing that we don't have to say every thought that comes into our mind, even in social situations. And on rare occasion, it might actually be possible to elevate the conversation. We shouldn't discount that possibility.

But I hope you see—and I love talking about this because it just points to the fact that Dharma practice is not just about sitting on the cushion, although obviously we're here doing this and it's a very powerful form. Dharma practice is our lives. This is everything we do. Our whole life is Dharma practice. And so we really want to see and understand and refine ways of practicing, of bringing it into our life in all of these very ordinary ways and activities.

Someone asked about ways of practicing dāna in everyday life. There's a practice which I have tried to do and practiced actually for many years, which I have found to be radically transforming. And that is—and

this goes back a long time now—that if I have a thought to give something, to do it. Not to second-guess myself.

Very often, and it's not that I'm purposely trying to have generous thoughts, although that could be its own practice. But this is more just paying attention to thoughts that are coming up in my mind. And if a thought comes to give in whatever way—whether it's material things or energy or whatever—a thought of generosity comes, act on it.

Sometimes it's really little things, and sometimes it's been really big things. Sometimes I shock myself. I do.

I have a thought, and then I think, "Whoa, am I going to do that?" But mostly I've tried to act on it, and it's been amazing because I have never regretted it. It always feels wonderful, and it's so intimately connected with metta, because in that act of generosity there's a very loving feeling present. So this could be a practice to undertake. And again, it's not something that needs to be undertaken in some rigid way.

Did I tell my house story? This is kind of a boundary on this practice. When we first started the center—it opened in '76—for the first thirteen years I lived right in the center, in the building. When I hit forty, I thought, "Okay, enough of this." I just felt like I needed to get out of communal living. There was a strong desire to have my own space. But I had very little money at the time, and a house was completely out of reach.

Then, with someone's amazing generosity—someone with great resources offered to build a house for Sharon and myself, which is next door. It was like a miracle, this great gift. So when I first moved in, I sat for a month on self-retreat in the new house. And I started having all these thoughts: "This is too nice. I shouldn't be living in such a nice space. Dharma teachers should be living... I don't know how they should be living, but not like this." I was feeling like I should just move out, give the house to the staff, build a hut in the woods.

But then I started thinking, "What's going on here? Why am I feeling this way?" And I saw that when I first moved in, I was embarrassed. That was the feeling—an uncomfortable feeling. And so I was trying to avoid it by thinking I would just give it up and move out. Then I realized I would much rather feel embarrassed than move out of the house. The embarrassment lasted a little bit, and it's long gone. I've really enjoyed living there.

So that's a situation where a thought arose—fortunately before I undertook this practice of acting on every thought of generosity. There might be certain boundaries to it, although maybe not. But this is a practice I have really found tremendously moving and powerful. And as I said, there's the whole range—just the impulse to do a little thing for somebody, to act on it.

Question from the audience: I've been exploring the precepts, and the second one in particular. For instance, I'll go out to my parents' place to visit them and then I'll ask for just about everything. "Is somebody expecting a phone call? I'd like to make a phone call." "Can I use the shower?" At what point is it

useful, and at what point is it making things more complicated? Trying to be impeccable and trying to see—is this obsessive? Is this really useful and wholesome?

The question is about the second precept—not taking what is not given. He says when he goes to visit his parents, before doing almost anything he'll ask, "Is it okay to take a shower now? Is it okay to use the phone? Are you expecting a phone call?" So where does this practice become obsessive rather than a skillful engagement with the precepts?

I think in certain situations—and you could check this out, it would be an interesting conversation to have with your parents—

But in many situations, I think we even know intuitively and out of common sense, or we can check it out. Is there a presumption of things being offered? So you can make a general understanding with your parents. Yes, there's a presumption that the food is being offered and the shower is being offered. And so you need not badger them with these questions each time.

Even having that discussion could be the beginning of an interesting conversation with your parents. Of course, I don't know them and I don't know how they hold all of this, but it could open into a discussion about the precepts and about your interest in really following this precept. And you can even acknowledge—I could imagine this in a discussion like that with your parents—you might say, "I know this may sound ridiculous, but I'm trying to follow this precept and this is what I'm thinking about." So it just becomes very open and then put to rest.

One of Munindra's phrases, which he used so many times, was a kind of variation on "simple but not easy"—but this is a more general phrase about our relationship to things. He would say so many times, and I'm so grateful because it really established in me a basic relationship to practice and to life. He would say, "Be simple and easy about things." Just be simple and easy. We don't need to overly complicate. Even in a situation like this, you could approach it in a simple and easy way in terms of having the discussion.

Just a little story about Munindra and being simple and easy. He was a very quirky person with a very quirky personality, which was very useful for me because it really punctured the illusion about how great dharma teachers should manifest—because he didn't manifest in those ways. He was just quirky.

In Bodh Gaya, sometimes we'd be in the bazaar and he'd be haggling with the peanut vendors, the people selling peanuts. He was a great bargainer. When he was visiting here, we took him to a flea market. The vendors did not stand a chance. He came away with tons of stuff that he wanted to bring back to give away in India. These poor people had never encountered anything like him.

So in Bodh Gaya, he's bargaining for five cents worth of peanuts. And someone—I can't remember whether it was me or somebody else—said, "Munindra, you keep saying be simple and easy. What are you doing?" And he said, "I said to be simple, not a simpleton." So he was very engaged in the world in all his quirky ways.

The next question was about intentions that are not seen. The example given was that during a sit that's quite concentrated, when the bell rings, the hands will have moved or changed position without any awareness of it. Is this something to be simple and easy about, or is this really consequential?

I think there are many, many intentions that we miss. We miss many more than we catch because they're very subtle and they're happening all the time. I think what's interesting in that situation is knowing or having seen that retroactively, looking back. So then you might set the intention at the beginning of a sitting to keep an eye out for it, so that you're including this one kind of unseen intention and see if you can make the unconscious conscious.

I think we can do that not only in something as simple as a shift of the hand position, which is relatively inconsequential, but also in patterns of speech where we look back at something and see, "I completely missed the intention for this, and it was harmful." So then we learn, okay, let me set the radar for that one. And this applies to so many different activities of our life. That's what makes it interesting—because we really are then making the unconscious conscious.

Now, the mind is a great mystery, and the unconscious has been defined in many ways depending on the discipline—whether in psychology or neuroscience or whatever. There are probably many different ways of understanding what's called the unconscious. But what I found in meditation, in at least one respect, is that I really began to feel there's simply a threshold of awareness in the mind. Everything beneath that threshold is unconscious, and everything above it is in our conscious minds.

And what I found, and I'm sure you've found as well, is that as the mind becomes quieter and more mindful, that threshold changes. More of what was previously unconscious comes into the light of awareness. That's a really interesting development in our lives. This investigation of intention is one very simple example of that process.

A question arose about whether the Buddha, when he talked about consciousness as one of the five aggregates, was referring to this threshold of awareness. Consciousness is defined in Buddhist psychology very precisely as simply the knowing faculty. What I was describing just now almost makes more sense to think of in terms of the threshold of delusion, of ignorance—one meaning of which is "not knowing." When we don't know what's arising, that's the function of delusion in the mind. Consciousness is still there; we're not unconscious in that sense. But things are going on that we're not aware of. So I would see that as the threshold of delusion rather than consciousness per se.

A final question came about practicing with the reflection on death, which is a classical Buddhist meditation. There are many ways to do this. One particular way I found very interesting was to take a period of time—it could be five minutes or ten minutes—where with each breath, each step, or hearing each sound, you take it to be your dying moment. It's not that the mind is thinking about taking it to be the dying moment; it's to really drop into what that would be like.

It's amazing. Even for short periods of time, the mindfulness gets so vivid. How would you want to be when you're dying? If you're really in your dying moment and this movement is it, just dropping that in, in a completely effortless way, the mind becomes amazingly vivid. That's one approach I found really helpful.

As for having discussions about death and dying with people who don't want to engage in those conversations—I wouldn't. We can't force our interests or even our understandings on people.

Why don't we just sit for a couple of minutes and let all the words drop into the silence.

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