Morning Reflection

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 18:18

First, I'd like to welcome all of those of you who just came on Saturday. For me, it's always quite amazing to come back and be teaching here at the Forest Refuge. I often don't come by here when I'm not teaching, and so every time I do, it strikes me anew. Just walking in on the grounds, the feeling of quiet and peacefulness is so tangible, even coming from the quiet of the retreat center. There's something quite special happening here. It's like entering into a field of peace. Of course, then one has to deal with one's own mind. However, the environment is very conducive for seeing what's going on. So I have a lot of mudita for all of you being here and having this opportunity to practice.

In the discourse which describes the last days of the Buddha, the Parinibbana Sutta, which describes the days just before his final passing and the circumstances around it—in that sutta there's a summary, one might say, of the basic principles of the teachings. It's like he includes the whole template for the teachings of awakening. In this are all the familiar lists: the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Five Spiritual Faculties, the Five Powers, and the Factors of Enlightenment. So it's a compilation of all those lists, and they're called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. Basically, the Buddha is saying these are the qualities of mind that need to be cultivated, that need to be developed in this process of awakening.

Now, there's a lot of repetition among these different lists; many of the same factors are named in different lists. But the factor that is named most frequently of all is right effort, or energy. I think it's worth considering—we'll be talking a lot about this both in the talks and in the interviews—because in one way it's obvious that in order to develop anything, whether in meditation or anything we try to accomplish in the world, it takes the application of energy. We have to be motivated to put forth that energy. That's why it says that energy, viriya, effort is the root of all achievement, the root of all attainment.

I think one of the problems for us as people practicing in the West, at least now and here, using English as the medium, is that the word "effort" carries a lot of baggage for many of us. Often effort is confused with efforting or excessive striving. So this quality of effort or energy is something we really need to explore in our practice. Because if in fact it is the root of everything in terms of our unfolding understanding, we want to make sure that the root is both well established and strengthened, but is also healthy—a healthy root, which means that we're cultivating energy, cultivating effort in a skillful way.

This takes practice. This is not something that is immediately obvious or something that we hear once and then we have it. This attention to the quality of our effort in practice is something we need to be continually paying attention to.

The Buddha himself gave examples of this. The famous one, I'm sure you're familiar with, involves a monk

who was striving too hard. His name was Sona, and he was not deepening in his practice because of too much effort. Sona had been a musician in his pre-ordained life, and the Buddha used the example of tuning the strings of a lute. If the strings are too tight, the sound won't be right. If the strings are too loose, the sound won't be right. It has to be tuned exactly right. That's what we're doing in our practice—we're learning how to tune the strings, the strings of our minds, the quality of right effort in our minds.

I want to read something which highlights this. This is from a Tibetan meditation master: "The teachings describe two shortcomings in practice called lack of attention and being over-attentive. In the former, lack of attention, one does not pay attention to the training and becomes lost in daydreaming." Familiar? Easy to do. "Being over-attentive means to be preoccupied with keeping hold of the meditation to such an extent that it disturbs the state of samadhi, of concentration. The hectic attempt to be so present, so mindful, turns into a distraction all by itself. Of course, one should have presence of mind, but it should be allowed to progress in a spacious way, not in a constrictive or rigid manner."

The more open the sense of being mindful is, the more at ease it becomes, the more relaxed we are. This relaxed quality is very important.

So this is the art of the practice. In so many ways, meditation is a science of the mind, where we become very precise and clear about exactly what is arising, how one thing conditions another. It follows what one could almost call scientific laws, and we're discovering these laws of the mind. On the other side, meditation is also an art. We need the sensitivity of an artist. As we're paying attention, what is the quality of our attention? Is it too little? Are we just getting lost and distracted, carried away by our minds and daydreams? Are we too tight? Are we struggling? Are we trying so hard to stay with the object that we're constricting the mind? That also becomes a problem.

The art is learning to pay attention to this. And we will fall off on both sides. It's not that we're going to tune the strings perfectly one time and they will stay like that. It's not like that. We'll be too tight at times, so then we need to relax. We'll get too relaxed at times, and we'll see the mind just wandering—then we need to sharpen, need to bring things in a little closer.

I would very much encourage you to pay attention to this quality of right effort throughout the day. Keep an eye out. The signals will be very clear. If you find that you're lost in thought a lot and just daydreaming, then you know that the effort is a little too loose. You have to come in closer, feel the experience more intimately. If you feel as you're going through the day that you're just getting more and more uptight, caught in this sense of struggle and wanting, and the practice is not going easefully—which doesn't always mean pleasantly; it just means that the mind is easeful with whatever's arising, whether pleasant or unpleasant—pay attention. Too tight? Relax a little bit. Too loose, too relaxed? Come in a bit closer.

You become almost like the conductor of the orchestra of your mind. A little louder here. You can quiet down there. It becomes very engaging because we're paying attention in that way. This is very important. If we're not paying attention to this, we will find ourselves falling off for longer periods of time on both

those sides.

Just one last beginning instruction, which most of you probably have heard me talk about many times. One way that I found helpful to enter into this balance—to at least give us some sense of what it feels like—is using a phrase found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Foundations of Mindfulness, where the Buddha says: be mindful "there is a body," to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness.

I love the simplicity of that. Be mindful, there is a body, to the extent necessary for clear knowing. It doesn't take a lot. We don't have to struggle. There's a body. We just recognize: oh yes, there's a body. To the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness—which suggests that we want to practice this continuity through the day.

I found that using that phrase, "there is a body," is a very helpful way of settling into the practice, both in sitting and in walking. That phrase is not meant as some ultimate statement of truth—there is a body on some metaphysical level. That's not what it's about. The phrase is simply a reminder to settle into the simple awareness of the feeling of the body, whether sitting or walking. "There is a body" brings us back.

With that frame—there is a body—then in a relaxed but attentive way, you can become aware of whatever is arising within that frame. You may be aware of the body breathing, the sensations of the body breathing, wherever you notice them—at the abdomen or the nose or the chest. There's no need particularly to zero in on the breath, although one could do that. It's also possible to keep the bigger frame of "there is a body" and within that, the awareness of the body breathing, keeping the mind relaxed in a slightly more open way.

Within that frame of "there is a body," maybe sounds will appear, or different sensations, or thoughts, or images. But you're holding the frame—there is a body—and then simply being aware of whatever else is arising moment to moment.

If you find that the mind is wandering and going off a lot, you can either come back—"oh, there's a body," so simple—or you could narrow the focus for a while and just feel the sensations of the breath. Then when the mind feels a little more stable, you can open up again: "Oh, there is a body," being aware of whatever arises.

There's this wonderful interweaving of the quality of our attention and how we're paying attention, both in the sitting and in the walking, throughout the whole day.

The last little mantra, which sums up everything: the practice is being relaxed but not casual. Relaxed—settled back, open to what's happening—but not casual, not where the mind is just half-hearted. We're really there in each moment with whatever's arising, pleasant or unpleasant. Very relaxed, very open, and very present, very connected.

Relaxed, but not casual.

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