The Radical Truth of Impermanence

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 53:49

The Buddha opens the Satipatthana discourse—the four foundations of mindfulness—with a very bold and unambiguous statement. He says, "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana, the highest peace. Namely, the four foundations of mindfulness." Pretty straightforward. This is the direct path.

An obvious question which follows is: how does this path of mindfulness—feeling our breath, feeling the body, feeling different sensations or thoughts and emotions—how in fact does it lead to liberation? What's the process by which it leads to the highest peace, to the highest freedom?

I think this question has particular relevance these days when secular mindfulness is so widespread. Mindfulness is amazingly popular and to good effect. But in the more secular context, it's not really held with the aspiration of liberation, of freedom. So as we're practicing, following the Buddha's instructions, it's helpful to keep in mind what the purpose of doing the practice is.

What are we learning from being mindful? We really want to be using the quality of mindfulness to understand how our minds are working and to free the mind from the deeply habituated forces of greed and attachment, of anger and hatred and fear, to free the mind from the sleep of delusion and ignorance.

In order to actualize this potential, I think it's very helpful to remember that we're not practicing mindfulness as an end in itself, although it has a very beneficial aspect in and of itself. But it is also leading us someplace much deeper and much more profound. The Burmese Sayadaw Uttachanir pointed to this when he said, "Awareness is not enough." It's the vehicle, it's the means, but by itself it's not enough. We need to use this great power of mindfulness, of awareness, of being aware of what's arising moment to moment without grasping, without greed, to be aware of what's arising without resistance, without aversion, without pushing away. And we do this in order to investigate what is true. We're using mindfulness as a skillful means for investigation.

One of the simplest and most profoundly transformative avenues of investigation—and investigation is really just another word for the wisdom factor of the mind—is a growing and increasingly refined awareness of impermanence. Investigation or wisdom is what illuminates the mind so that we can see clearly.

There's a little story that many of you may have heard of a student of Suzuki Roshi's. He was a Japanese Zen master, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center back in the 1960s. The student said to Roshi, "I've

been listening to your lectures for years, but I still don't understand. Could you please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?"

What's the one phrase of Buddhism that will reveal all?

Everything changes. That was Roshi's response. Everything changes.

The implications of that simple statement are enormous. Although we all know that everything changes, this is not a hidden truth. This is not some special, mystical, esoteric truth. You can go up to anybody on the streets and ask them, "Do things change?" Everybody will say yes. We all know this. But we need to go from an intellectual understanding of it to the level of a direct, ongoing, intimate, lived experience of change as it's happening. That's what our practice is about. Can we bring the awareness right into this flow of changes so that we know it from the inside?

When we can do this, when we can really deeply and truly see the truth of change, it has great consequences. Over time, from seeing the change, directly perceiving it as it's happening, what happens is that our hearts and our minds relax. We let go of so many kinds of struggle and suffering.

We can see this so clearly with our aging bodies. Even though it seems like some of us are aging more quickly than others, we're actually all aging at the same rate. Some are just a little further along than others.

If we're attached to our bodies staying a certain way, when they change—as they always will for everybody, whether through accidents, through illness, or simply through aging—if we're attached to them staying a certain way, we suffer. It's so obvious.

But it's quite different, and often very difficult, to see that these natural changes are not a mistake. We understand that they're not a mistake for other people. It's just so interesting to observe our own relationship to our own changing, aging bodies and to see the changes that take place. Because even though we know on so many levels that this is just how it is, deep inside there's some place that wonders: did I do something wrong? If I were really on top of things, it wouldn't quite be happening like this.

So we have to be investigating and seeing and reflecting over and over again, because this habit pattern of attachment to wanting things to stay the same goes very deep. It's almost on an unconscious level. Obviously, we haven't done anything wrong. This is just the nature of things. This is the nature of life. This is the nature of the Dharma. This process of change, of growth, decay, and death—this is just the normal cycle of what happens. It is the nature of things. It happens to everyone. It happens to everything.

So if we can use mindfulness of what's arising in the service of clearly seeing impermanence, that's the point of being mindful—so that we can see that whatever is arising, it's changing, and it's always changing. The more we see it, the more repeatedly we see it about everything, gradually it deconditions that habit pattern of clinging, of attachment, of grasping, because we're seeing the process of change so clearly and

so deeply.

What's particularly worth noting is this: for some strange reason, we're not only attached to holding on to the pleasant. We also have habit patterns of holding on to what's unpleasant. In some way, we hold on to our suffering. How often do we justify to ourselves feelings of anger or hatred or jealousy or envy or pride? We justify them to ourselves, thinking, "Well, I should be feeling this because of whatever circumstances"—forgetting that we're the ones who are suffering in them. These mind states are like a burning in the mind. Why should we hold on to that suffering?

The more we see, the more repeatedly we see the impermanent nature of it all—the impermanent nature of all these emotions. They arise, they're like cloud formations in the sky; the conditions change, the clouds disappear.

Mindfulness and investigation of what's arising shows us, with each experience that we're having, that we have a choice. The Buddha used a quite famous example, I'm sure you're familiar with it—the example of the two arrows. We may have some unpleasant experience arise. It could be an unpleasant sensation in the body, a painful sensation. It could be a painful emotion, a painful external situation. So that's the first arrow, and that's a kind of dukkha. We're experiencing the unpleasantness of it. But the second arrow is how we're relating to that unpleasant experience. Do we hate it? Is there fear? Is there resistance? Are we adding suffering to suffering? The second arrow is up to us. No one makes us relate to our experience in a particular way.

This is really important, because as long as we think that someone else is making us feel a certain way, making us be with our experience in a certain way, we are handing over all our power. How we relate to what's arising—whether it's in the body, in the mind, in the world—how we relate to what's arising is totally up to us. This is tremendously empowering. We have a choice.

Just as an example of a choice with regard to how we relate to thoughts—I was talking about this this morning—thoughts come and go all day long. One choice, which is often made mechanically, unknowingly, is we just get carried away by them. We get lost in them. We create a whole little mind world, a mind drama, until we wake up. Another way of relating to them is again expressed by Suzuki Roshi. I just came across this.

He said, leave your front door and your back door open. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Just don't serve them tea.

Can we remember that? It's so amazing, the seductive power of the world—it seduces us again and again. What's remarkable is that when we look back at our past experience, we can see and feel so clearly the ephemeral, passing nature of it all. The experiences we had a year ago, or a month ago, or yesterday, or this morning, or five minutes ago—where are they now? In the midst of them, we get so caught up, so entangled. Yet when we look back at all our past experience, we know—this is not theoretical—we know

for ourselves that they're totally gone.

But here's what's so amazing: when we look ahead, even though we know that looking back it all seems so empty, so ephemeral, so insubstantial, we become entranced by all the different possibilities, whether pleasant or unpleasant. We can be looking ahead with desirous anticipation or looking ahead with fear, forgetting that whatever experience will come will soon be past, just like all the others, dissolving into that arena of empty, ephemeral phenomena.

Why do we know this looking in one direction and forget it looking in the other? Looking back we know it; looking ahead we forget. This is worth noticing—how for most of us, we are continually looking ahead to what I call the next hit of experience. We're looking forward, leaning forward, anticipating, thinking about it. It could be the next event in our lives, the next day of work, the next project, the next relationship, the next problem or difficulty we might be facing.

On retreat, the same thing happens as in the world. The mind is looking ahead—maybe to the next meal, the next sitting, the next walking, even the next breath. We're just sitting here feeling the breath, but we're with one breath leaning into the next one. Again, we forget that whatever we're experiencing or want to experience will also soon be past. There's nothing there really either to want or to hold on to.

Now, the great paradox of spiritual life is that as objects of wanting, as objects of desire, all of these changing experiences of life leave us unfulfilled. This is obvious—they leave us unfulfilled because they don't last, and so they are incapable of creating lasting fulfillment. But these very same experiences, which as objects of desire leave us unfulfilled, as objects of mindfulness become the vehicle of our awakening.

This is important because it means we're not, in the practice, pushing things away. It's not that experiences are bad and that we shouldn't be having them. Rather, it's about learning deeply to not hold on, to not cling.

Liberating insight into impermanence comes in so many ways and on so many different levels, because everything is part of this process of change. We can see it in science—from the birth and death of galaxies, of clusters of galaxies, of stars. They also take birth, exist for some time, and pass away. All the way down to the smallest scale, the subatomic particles.

I want to read something about just how quickly things are changing on the most fundamental level of material existence. It said that capturing the motion of an electron within an atom seems like an impossible task, not least because the shuffling, the changing between orbits or escaping the nucleus, takes just attoseconds. An attosecond is a billionth of a billionth of a second. That's pretty quick. To put this in perspective, an attosecond is to a second what the blink of an eye is to ten billion years. That's the difference. Undaunted, scientists have found ways to operate on such infinitesimal scales.

We have this notion that the world is solid and stable, yet things are changing at the rate of a billionth of a billionth of a second. Our quest for ultimate stability is doomed. It's not that we can't find relative

stability—we all know that. But we really want to understand that on the most fundamental level—physical world, material world—there are huge, rapid changes happening all the time. That's what makes up our world. So obviously, our ordinary perception is not picking up change at that level of rapidity.

Most of us, maybe. Some of you may.

But I think we all know from our meditation experience that as mindfulness and concentration get stronger, we do begin to perceive change on more and more refined levels. It's what I call NPMs—Noticings Per Minute. For beginning yogis, the NPMs are quite low. When people are just learning and training, maybe there are ten noticings per minute. But as we practice, those NPMs go way up. We can really begin to discern in a very refined way the rapidity of change.

Even in the ordinary experiences of our meditation—in a breath, in a step, a sound—so many things are going on. Just when you listen to the sound of the bell, how quick are the vibratory elements of that? Sound is not one thing. Very rapid changes, which we can perceive. We simply need to pay attention to it.

Or think of times perhaps when you went to a movie and got caught up in the drama and all the attendant emotions—feeling happy or sad or whatever it is. But is there really anybody up there who's falling in love or getting chased or dying? No. All of that is an illusion created by the rapidity of change. All that's happening are pixels of light on the screen changing very quickly, creating an appearance, and we get seduced by the appearance because we're not seeing the change.

So our practice, the point of developing mindfulness, the point of developing strong concentration, is to enhance our ability to see the changing, impermanent nature of everything that's arising—so we don't get seduced by the story. This is not to suggest that we don't engage with the ordinary aspects of life, because we do. We relate to one another as human beings, not as infinitely rapidly changing aggregates, even though that's what's really happening. We relate in a conventional, hopefully harmonious way. But if we have also seen on a deeper level what's happening—and we can in our meditation practice really see and feel that this whole mind-body is a rapidly changing energy system—if we have touched that directly, something shifts. This doesn't require being a super yogi to feel. It may take some time to drop into that level of stillness, but this is within the realm of all of our capability and capacity.

As we settle in, as the concentration gets a little bit stronger and mindfulness a little bit stronger, we do begin to feel this flow of changes. And because of that, even as we engage with the ordinary conventional world, we are less caught by it. We see, we have a deeper understanding. We don't so easily fall into suffering and reactivity.

We can be developing our awareness of impermanence on so many different levels, and they all feed one another. In retreat we can develop it very clearly in our meditation practice, our formal practice where we're watching things just arise and pass. But we can also develop and refine our awareness of

impermanence in very ordinary ways. It comes from paying attention to impermanence in ways that we already know but often overlook.

When seeing impermanence becomes the perspective through which we're looking at our experience, everything around us is revealing it. We see all the changes in nature. Just the huge issue of climate change—that's on a big scale. On a more daily scale: New England weather. One day it's freezing, a snowstorm. Next day it's seventy degrees. It's always changing. There's no stability.

On a societal level, when we look in a historical way, we can see impermanence in the rise and fall of whole civilizations. I think I've mentioned in different talks, some years ago I read a biography of Genghis Khan. I think he lived in the thirteenth century. He ruled practically all of Asia—a completely powerful, dominant person influencing millions and millions of people. How many of you thought of Genghis Khan today? I'll bet none of you did. So even people with that enormous impact—

Whole civilizations rise, become powerful, and pass away.

It's wonderful now that the weather is nicer—some of you may be walking in these woods. The New England woods are filled with miles of stone walls and old stone foundations. They didn't just appear. People built those stone walls. People built the stone foundations of those houses. People whose lives were as vivid and compelling as our own. And now what's left? We walk through the woods and there are some stone walls and some old stone foundations. Where are all these people now? Where are all those stories now? What remains?

And then we look even closer—not just externally. We look closer at the changing experience of all our relationships, our work, our bodies and minds. We see that everything, on every level, from galaxies to subatomic particles to historical events to the events in our own mind and body—everything on every level is disappearing and new things arising moment after moment.

After the talk, try a little experiment. When you leave the hall, just in the few minutes it takes to go from where you're sitting to leaving the hall, see if you can pay attention to the enormous flow of changes that will take place simply in that short distance. The changes of sensations as you go from sitting to standing. The changes of sensation as you begin walking. The sensations of the movement. The different sights that appear and change as you move. The different sounds that are arising. Perhaps the thoughts that are passing through your mind. In this short distance, the NPMs can be quite high if you're paying attention.

It's not that these objects are so subtle. It's just that we generally overlook them. It becomes so ordinary. "Oh, the talk is over. Go out and do some walking." We simply are not paying attention to this experience that is unfolding every single moment. Things are arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing.

The more deeply we perceive impermanence, the more continuously we perceive impermanence, the less we cling, the less we suffer.

Here is the Buddha's description of the liberated mind. He said, "In seeing impermanence"—when we are really in the perceiving of impermanence—"the mind doesn't cling. When the mind doesn't cling, it is not agitated. When it's not agitated, it personally attains Nibbana."

That's straight out of the suttas. I think it's very helpful to hear those words. For years I read them, and I always took them as a description. "Oh yes, when the mind doesn't cling, it's not agitated. When not agitated, it attains Nibbana." But it was only recently, in the last couple of years, that I thought of that phrase differently. Instead of taking it as a description, I took it as an instruction.

So I began to look for myself—not just to say, "Oh yes, that's how the Buddha described it," but rather to make the experiment for yourself. When your mind is really seeing the flow of change—and it could be in something as simple as just taking a step, you're taking a step and feeling the changes—at those times when you are actually perceiving the flow of change, check to see whether your mind is clinging or not. You're testing the Buddha's words. Is this true for me?

It was very revealing. When the mind is really perceiving the flow of changes, and I look back on my mind, it wasn't clinging—because it was perceiving the change. And then I did the next step. Okay, it's not clinging. I looked back on the non-clinging mind, the experience of it, and I asked myself, "Well, when it's not clinging, is it agitated?" Again, not something just to believe. We want to see in our own minds whether this is true.

What I found was that when my mind was not grasping, it was not agitated.

So we get a taste in those few moments. We really get an experiential taste, an experience of what non-clinging feels like, and then what non-agitation feels like, because we've seen it. And then in non-agitation, we really can get the sense—it may not be Nibbana itself, but we can get the sense that it's in the vicinity of Nibbana.

Buddhadasa, who was a Thai monk from southern Thailand over the last century, had a very unique approach, and a lot of his teachings are collected in a book called *The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*. He put things in very simple, direct ways—he was really quite a masterful teacher. He talked about these moments of coolness, of non-agitation, as momentary nibbana. He used the example that evidently in ancient India, the term nibbana was used conventionally to refer to something that had cooled down. They used it, for example, when rice was cooked and then had cooled—it was "nibbanad." Buddhadasa's point was that we can have many, many moments of this momentary nibbana, momentary coolness throughout the day, but mostly we're not paying attention. We just miss it because we're not looking, we're not appreciating that non-agitation of mind.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, when it talks about the hindrances, it says that we should be aware of when the hindrances are there and when they're not there. Mostly we give emphasis to when they're there—whether it's desire or anger or sleepiness, whatever. But it would be very helpful to check in

throughout the day, because many times the hindrances are not there. We want to recognize that coolness of mind. Oh, the mind is still now. The mind is calm. The mind is not clinging. The mind is not agitated. Don't overlook this.

This becomes very apparent and could be a signal for you to check in: when you remember to take times to really be seeing the impermanence, the flow, and you're perceiving that, then all of these states will be revealed—the non-clinging, the non-agitation, the coolness. I cannot overemphasize how important this is.

Ledi Sayadaw, who was one of the great Burmese masters living around the late 1800s and early 1900s, was both a great meditation master and a great scholar—an amazing, amazing monk. He said that not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance. Not seeing it is ignorance. While seeing all phenomena as impermanent—actually seeing it, not just thinking about it—is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening.

This is not some little thing. Our refinement and our practice of seeing the changes that are happening all the time, on every level, inside and outside—we don't have to look far to see impermanence. We just have to be paying attention, because it's already happening. That is the nature of things.

Again, this is the Buddha's teaching from the Dhammapada: "Fully knowing the arising and passing of the aggregates, the five aggregates, one attains joy and delight. For those who know, this is the deathless."

The instruction is very clear and very simple. This is not complicated. But very often, particularly in the midst of our busy lives—though it can happen here as well on retreat—it's very easy to become complacent. We've all established certain habit patterns in our lives and in our meditation. We kind of get into a groove of how we meditate, just following along in that groove. We can get complacent, not actually arousing the interest, the investigation, to be seeing the impermanence. It takes a certain activation of interest, an activation of energy.

But there are some reflections and observations of obvious truths which can help to jolt us out of complacency, that can really help to wake us up. Probably the most obvious and most ignored reflection—this is so obvious—is that the end of birth is death. The end of birth is death. Our life is just getting shorter and shorter and shorter. We are all in the queue. We are all in the line, and it's only going in one direction. But how often is this really alive for us?

In the great Indian classic, the Mahabharata, one of the sages makes the comment that one of the most remarkable things in the world is that we see people dying all around us, but we don't think it will happen to us. We know intellectually that it will. But how vital is that understanding in how we live? Do we really have that understanding? How alive is the understanding of death?

This is a powerful reflection. The Buddha gave some remarkably short and pithy instructions for how to reflect in this way, and they're ones that I have found genuinely helpful. Again, it's like a jolt of wakefulness. He said to reflect like this: what is subject to old age will grow old, and I am not exempt.

What is subject to illness will become ill, and I am not exempt. What is subject to death will die, and I am not exempt.

Even though it's so obvious, what I found in myself is so humbling to realize—that in some deep part of myself, I think I am exempt. I can be going along and all of a sudden there's a certain pain in my back or my knee or wherever, and I think, "Oh, why did that happen?" Well, you were born. You have a body. This is what's going to happen. But no, I should be exempt. We really need to take in that this is the nature of this whole mind-body process. It's the dharma, it's the law.

If we can reflect in this way—and often in my practice, when I'm on retreat and these things happen, I will just use this little tagline, "I am not exempt"—it's a very good reminder. It changes my relationship to the experience. Instead of fighting it or resisting it or thinking it shouldn't be happening, I recognize that this is just the nature of things.

Sometimes people may think that all these reflections on change and death and dying and illness are morbid, something we should avoid. Why would anybody want to be thinking about this stuff? But really they are reflections on what is true. We're not imagining this. The Buddha was pointing out that this is the dharma, this is the truth of our lives. If we want to be free, we need to be in alignment with what is true. This is what our practice is all about.

I asked in the beginning of the talk: why be mindful? What is it that we learn from being mindful? It's not enough simply to be mindful—it's necessary, that's the tool, that's the view—but what are we learning from being mindful? We're learning, in this one essential aspect, that whatever has the nature to arise is going to pass. We need to imbibe that very, very deeply. We really need to see that all of our experience is part of an endlessly passing show. It's like the water in a river flowing, or water over a waterfall. It's just phenomena of the mind, of the body, internally, externally—just this endless flow.

Munindraji, my first teacher, used a phrase which resonated for many years in my practice. He would say often, "Empty phenomena rolling on." It's just empty, empty of self. Empty phenomena rolling on. That's what this mind-body is. That's what this world is.

Seeing this clearly—seeing this impermanence, this flow of momentary change, change on every level—seeing it clearly and repeatedly reorients our mind toward care and compassion rather than clinging and attachment. It reorients our mind toward letting go rather than holding on, because we're seeing that there's nothing to hold on to. Deepening our insight, our direct insight, the direct seeing—deepening this reorients our minds toward freedom rather than bondage, rather than being caught.

I'd like to close with one teaching from a Tibetan Rinpoche named Dzigar Kongtrul. I think he really expresses the essence of what we're doing here. He said: "The potential for realization, for awakening, is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your

efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself." The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path of liberation.

Now liberation depends on you. This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you.

So that's both our challenge and our inspiration. We can do this. We're on the path. And we can take inspiration from that opening sentence of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: this is the direct path to realization.

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