Morning Reflection

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 14:56

One comment that the Buddha made, which we can see very clearly in our own experience, is that the mind can be our best friend or our worst enemy. I think we've all had experiences of both those situations.

One of the things that most determines whether our minds become our best friends or worst enemies has to do with our understanding of and relationship to the thoughts in our minds. We have so many different kinds of thoughts arising and passing—thousands and thousands of times a day for most people.

I want to read something from one of the great Tibetan masters about this. This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

"When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors. Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all. There is therefore no logical reason why thoughts should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us. But as long as we take our deluded thoughts as real, they will continue to torment us mercilessly as they have been doing through countless past lives."

That's a very clear statement about how unnoticed thoughts can have such a powerful influence on our experience. And yet when we see into their true nature, we see that they really are empty—empty of substance. There's nothing much there.

So how do we practice developing this understanding and this relationship to thoughts? This becomes a very interesting, liberating, and energizing part of our practice. Because mostly we pay attention to thoughts after the fact. We realize that we've been lost, then we have some kind of reaction to having been lost, and maybe we bring the mind back to the present, to the breath or to a step. But there's a much more active way of engaging with thought as an object that is very illuminating, very freeing.

There are really three steps in working with thoughts, but this morning I just want to emphasize two of them. The three steps are: being aware that the thought is there, so we're mindful of our thinking rather than lost in it; recognizing the content of the thought; and looking at the nature of thought itself.

The second step, which I won't talk about much this morning, is recognizing the content of the thought. Is it wholesome or is it unwholesome? Does the thought contain or is it sourced by greed or hatred or delusion? Or is the content of the thought based in non-greed, generosity, love, or wisdom? That's part of what we can do in being with thought.

The third aspect is really looking at the nature of thought itself—investigating the mind, bringing the wisdom mind to see directly what a thought is. Not the content, but the very nature of a thought. What is a thought?

I want to talk a little bit about the first and third of these.

First, we have to recognize that a thought is present, that the mind is actually thinking. If we're not aware of it, then we're simply carried along on the train of association. At some point we hop off the train and don't quite know where we've been.

It takes a certain intentionality. Perhaps at the beginning of a sitting or a walking or moving about, you might set the intention in the mind: let me keep an eye out for the arising of thought. Instead of it being something that you try to catch up with after it's already happened, you're setting the intention to have the mind keeping an eye out for the arising of thought. You're with the body or the breath or movement or sounds, whatever. But somewhere in the mind is that intentionality—the intention to be aware as thoughts arise in the mind.

I find this particularly helpful and interesting in the walking. Not only formal walking meditation, but just in walking about. It's so easy to get caught up in the activity of what one is doing. You're going maybe for your yogi job, or you're going to your room to do something, or having a cup of tea, or even walking to the dining room—and your idea is to get to the dining room. Very often we're caught up more in the activity of what we're doing and we've lost that settled-back ability to just be watching for the quickly passing thoughts that may arise. They may not be big ones; they may be really quick.

This is very helpful. In a way, it's like keeping an eye out for Mara. Mara is going to come in the form of a seductive thought: "Let's see if I can catch this yogi."

But if you're just doing whatever you're doing—as I say in the walking, I've really found it very helpful because it's not a big strain when you're walking or moving about. You don't have to work very hard to be aware of the predominant experience. You're just taking a step and it's very obvious and it doesn't take a lot of effort. We want to be attentive to it, but it doesn't take much energy to actually feel a step or a movement, so we can give a little more attention to that awareness which is keeping an eye out for the thoughts that are arising.

It's clear. You're just moving about, you're walking around, but there's some place in the mind that's just watching those quickly passing thoughts. And it's not necessarily big ones or dramatic ones. They can be very slight, light, quick. With practice, you can get quite skilled in becoming increasingly aware of these passing thoughts.

This has a tremendous benefit. First, it shows how often we've been lost in thought, unbeknownst to us—where we get carried away and we don't even know it. It begins to show how each of these little thoughts are also reconditioning the mind, because a lot of them have to do with "I" and "me" and "mine"

and past and future. We create a whole sense of self even for a couple of moments. It may not be a big drama, just these momentary mind stories of self, but they happen so frequently that we are often recreating and reconditioning this strong sense of self throughout the day—and we don't even know it.

Even when I'm going for a walk, in addition to all the kinds of walking you're doing right within the Forest Refuge—walking meditation or doing some task—even if you're choosing to go for a walk, which should be meditative as well, it's very interesting. You're walking, enjoying the openness, the spaciousness—just watch. It will give you a new appreciation of what the mind does and what the mind is doing throughout the day in a very ordinary way. It's very illuminating.

So this is the first thing: to really give attention to watching out for the arising, the appearing, the appearance—just those quick thoughts that go through the mind. Once you get a little bit relaxed in your awareness of this, so it's not a question of getting tight or tense, it's not like a cat at a mouse hole—it's very relaxed. You're moving about, but you're just, as I say, keeping an eye out for the thoughts. The more relaxed you are, the easier it will be to see them. The relaxation is an important point.

When you feel like you've gained a little bit of experience, or understand this, or have practiced with it, at times then, as these thoughts come, you can ask yourself the question: What is a thought? Not what is it saying, but just as a sound appears and disappears and we have a sense of what a sound is—what is a thought? What is the phenomenon?

Very interesting, because it's so ephemeral, so insubstantial, so empty, like Dilgo Khyentse said. When we really look directly at the nature of thought, we see that it's almost nothing. It's little more than nothing.

And yet, when we're not aware of them, they have tremendous power to cause suffering in our lives. How much suffering do we go through because we get lost in and carried away in the thought processes? They create whole stories, whole dramas with all the attendant emotions. We can get totally caught up in a whole mind-created world, forgetting or not seeing in those moments that this is just a thought in the moment.

It would be really helpful for you to practice with this during this time. I'm going to talk a little bit about this tonight, but even more next Monday, because I really want to give emphasis to this. But I thought it would be good to have a chance to actually practice with it, give attention to it, so that in talking about it then you'll actually be able to perhaps understand it on a deeper level from your own experience, not just theoretically.

Good luck.

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