No Foothold

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 57:17

Tonight I'd like to speak about some of the things that were of interest to me on my own recent retreat, and maybe they'll be of interest to you. We'll see. I just always find, after all these years of doing retreats, it's such an endlessly interesting journey when we take the time to look into our own minds and bodies and see what's going on. Very often when I come out of retreat, people will ask me, "Well, how was it?" And every year it's the same: it's everything. We see it all.

One of the biggest challenges for Dharma practitioners is the integration in our lives of the levels of relative and more ultimate truth. A lot of the teachings are expressed in very conventional language, and we live our lives very much on the level of relative conventional reality. Yet in our Dharma practice, we're also exploring what could be called the more ultimate level of truth or reality.

The Buddha described this more ultimate level in several different ways, which you're very familiar with. He talked about understanding reality in terms of the five aggregates: body, form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness. That's one template for understanding the more ultimate level. Another template is the six sense spheres: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and their respective sense objects.

The Buddha described, in one very succinct sutta which is really quite remarkable, all of our experience. He called this sutta "The All." It's quite remarkable that he described every aspect of our experience in six phrases. He said: the eye and visible objects, the ear and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. And he challenged anybody to say, is there anything other than that in our experience? It's quite remarkable—we live in these very complicated stories of ourselves and of the world, and yet it's always only these six things that are ever happening.

Being here on retreat, in this very protected and peaceful environment, is really a chance to explore this more ultimate level of reality, to drop out of the more usual relative or conventional level. Even though, as we live in the world, we do need to engage in a very conventional way. We need to relate to people as people, not as a conglomeration of aggregates or sense spheres. That would be rather odd.

So our challenge is to integrate the two levels so that even when we're involved in the world, as we all are in one way or another, we don't lose sight completely of the underlying, empty, insubstantial, selfless nature of it all. It might be something like a lucid dream. In lucid dreaming, which some people experience, there's dreaming, but we know that we're dreaming. Even in the midst of the dream, we know that it's a dream. So can we live our lives like that? To know that on one level it's a dream, and yet at the same time we're in it and we're acting and we're relating.

This gives us a chance to experience life in a much freer way. The more we understand these two levels—relative and ultimate or more ultimate—and how they work together, the more we begin to experience compassion in two different ways. The compassion starts to come not particularly as a practice or as a stance, but really as the natural response to suffering.

We can experience compassion for the suffering, both mental and physical, that we and everyone else goes through in this dreamlike existence. There is a lot of suffering in the world and there's a lot of suffering in our own lives. As we are more open and less self-centered, this response of compassion comes more and more effortlessly.

And then when we awaken even a little bit to the fact that it really is all a dream, it's all empty and insubstantial, we can have compassion for ourselves and others who are still lost in the dream. We begin to see that the real freedom is not in changing the dream, but in waking up. That's really what our practice here is about.

One of the great misconceptions that we have throughout our lives, as we're in the dream, is that the ordinary perception we have of ourselves and others is somehow accurate and true—that our perceptions reflect some true, stable, ultimate reality, as if the world is solid and fixed and we know what's what. This misconception that the world is as we perceive it leads to tremendous suffering, both globally and individually.

There's a Buddhist scholar named Rune Johansson, and he expressed this very clearly. He said, "Things are seen through the lenses of our desires, prejudices, and resentments, and are transformed accordingly." We're seeing the world, we're perceiving the world through the lenses of our desires and our resentments, and then we're taking that to be the reality.

Just one somewhat humorous example: years ago I was on a retreat in Australia, practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita, and I was doing walking meditation in the parking lot where all the cars were parked.

I was doing walking meditation and then I saw this bird right at the back of a car. It saw its reflection in the chrome bumper, and every time it saw its reflection, it flew into it and hit the bumper, then fell back. And then it saw its reflection again in the bumper, thinking it was another bird, flew into it, attacked it, fell back.

Now I do not want to slight birds, but this particular one had a bird brain because it kept on doing this. I mean, you would think it would learn. But how often are we doing the same thing? We're just flying into the world as we perceive it and getting involved in all kinds of suffering, not seeing that much of what we see is seen through the filter of our wants and likes and dislikes.

Just think about a very common situation: all the assumptions we have about other people. I'm sure each one of you has plenty of ideas about everyone else in this room, and you're not even speaking to them. But all kinds of judgments arise—good or bad, like or dislike. And it's all just assumptions. We're making it up.

Here on retreat there's not much interpersonal interaction, but out in the world, we're often relating to people based on these assumptions. And my experience is that they're very often inaccurate. When we get to know somebody, we begin to understand them in a completely different way.

So we can also understand how one very common perception—or misperception—informs and influences both our meditation practice and our lives. This one is so deeply rooted. I think probably everyone here shares in this misperception. And that is the deeply conditioned view that pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad.

Almost all of us, probably all of us, have this preference for what is pleasant and avoidance of what is unpleasant. Yet, as the Buddha said very directly in the teachings—and this particular statement always kind of makes me sit up straight—he said, "As long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible."

That's a very strong statement that runs counter to this deeply held perception that we have. It's so counter to our experience. So then how to work with this? Because the Buddha was so clear in what he's saying.

For myself, I found that rather than simply holding this as some far-off goal—well, maybe someday, in five hundred lifetimes, I'll be in the place where there's no preference, where pleasant and unpleasant are fine—instead of thinking of it as some ultimate goal, I began to see that we can actually practice that for short moments. We can all taste the truth of that and the peace of that, even if it's for short moments at a time. And as we do that, we become a little more familiar with the possibility of it. Oh, this is the mind that is non-reactive to pleasant or unpleasant.

So a few reflections that over the years have helped me explore this possibility. Because if we are really interested in liberation—not simply in making the dream better, but if we're really interested in freeing the mind—this is something we have to address, we have to look at in ourselves. How can we begin just to play, to explore what this possibility is?

There's one teaching in the suttas, a phrase that comes up often when the Buddha is visiting someone who is very sick or dying. The dialogue will often go, "How are you feeling? Are your pains diminishing?" And the person will often say, "No, they're not diminishing, they're getting stronger." Then come these descriptions of how their heads feel like they're going to explode and the pain is getting so intense—very strong descriptions of the body in difficult circumstances, in painful circumstances.

And the Buddha's comment, which is very simple but profound: "Though your body is afflicted, may your mind be unafflicted."

Even to think of that as a possibility. We think that for us to be at peace, somehow the body has to be unafflicted. But it's not like that, because that's not the nature of the body. It will be afflicted at different times—as we grow older, or ill, or dying. So can the mind remain unafflicted even as the body is afflicted?

We can take this as a point of investigation. What would this mean? Can we look inside at the nature of the mind that might remain unafflicted?

I had quite an interesting experience of this some years ago. It was January, and I had gone with friends for a week's vacation in the Caribbean. Pleasant. Every sense door pleasant. Pleasant sights, pleasant sounds, pleasant everything. It was just pleasant.

Then I came back to Barre in January. That particular January was freezing cold—I mean, it can get really, really cold here. Maybe twenty below zero with a biting icy wind. Exceedingly unpleasant.

As I was walking in this really unpleasant weather, I began to contrast the two experiences. What I saw was really interesting: the nature of the knowing mind was the same. The nature of the mind to know, simply to know what's happening—it was knowing pleasant, it was knowing unpleasant, but the quality of the knowing itself was the same. The quality of knowing was not affected or afflicted. It simply knew.

So it's turning the attention to the very nature of knowing, the very nature of awareness. Even as unpleasant things are arising, if we abide in or understand the mind that knows what's happening, it gives us a taste, a glimpse of a possibility: this is how my mind can be unafflicted even as the body is afflicted.

Another way of turning the mind to this possibility—and I've found this practice very helpful over the years—is when the body is suffering in some way, when there's pain or distress, and I can see the mind tightening or contracting or having aversion to that experience, which is a common response, I start reflecting: can I be with this experience of pain or discomfort as if these are my dying moments? It's like practice for dying. It's very likely, or at least not unlikely, that when we are dying it may not be comfortable—most likely it won't be. So can we practice for that?

What's so interesting is that as soon as I reframed it from the more conventional perception—"my body's killing me, I don't like this, my back hurts, my knees hurt"—to "these are the dying moments, how do I want to be with this?"—just that reframe settled the awareness, settled the mind back. I can be with this in a more equanimous way.

This is a very good practice, and the Buddha talked about this reflection on dying. Not an intellectual reflection, but actually relating to experience in the moment as if this is our dying moment. How do we want to be with it? And I think you may be surprised at how much clarity, how much stability comes from that reframing.

We carry this same preference for pleasant and avoidance of unpleasant into our meditation practice too. It's not just in our life experiences. There's a commonly held view, and I'm sure at times all of you have had this perception, that a pleasant sitting is good and a painful sitting is bad. Maybe not during retreat, but perhaps at home when you're practicing. You get up from a sitting and somebody asks, "How was your sitting?" If it was pleasant, you probably say, "Yeah, it was a good sitting." And if there was a lot of difficulty, "It was really a bad sitting." Because we're laying this misperception—that pleasant is good and

unpleasant is bad—right onto our meditation.

Even though we know intellectually that this is not so, and we've all heard it so many times, the quality of the sitting has to do with how mindful we are, not how pleasant or unpleasant it is. But still this misperception keeps arising because it's rooted in the latent tendencies of desire and aversion. We want what's pleasant and we don't want what's unpleasant. So we interpret it as good and bad.

Of course, a very obvious question arises: why not crave what is pleasant? Doesn't that seem like a normal and natural thing to do—wanting what's pleasant and not wanting what's unpleasant? It seems so obvious that this is a reasonable way to live.

But what the Buddha pointed out over and over again is that even pleasant experiences are not ultimately satisfying precisely because they change, they're impermanent, they're not lasting. We're left craving another pleasant experience, which doesn't last. We crave another one and another one. This is the endless cycle of saṃsāra. This is what keeps us on the wheel—thinking the goal is to have as many pleasant experiences as possible. And they don't last. So we want another, and it doesn't last.

It's like being one of those animals on a revolving wheel. And we miss the opportunity to experience the peace and the freedom of not wanting.

As long as we're living with the misconception that pleasant is good, that I should have as much pleasant experience as possible, we keep wanting it, it keeps disappearing, and we want more. As long as we're caught in that cycle, that way of understanding things, we're missing the chance to experience the peace of not wanting.

So here's a very interesting experiment for you to try. The next time a desire should happen to arise in your mind—you know, maybe it will be in a few days or so—whenever the next desire arises, if you can be mindful, even if it's not right at the beginning, even if somewhere in the middle you become aware, pay particular attention to how that wanting mind feels, how the desiring mind feels, without any preconception. Just explore it for yourself. Don't believe anything. Really see: how does this feel, to be wanting, to be desiring?

And then, at a certain point, that desire is going to go away. It's going to change. In that moment of it changing, the moment of it disappearing, notice how it feels when the mind doesn't want. And just compare the two. Very interesting.

We're living in the illusion that the desire or the wanting itself is pleasant. Our whole society is basically oriented toward feeding your desires, as if desire itself is a good thing to have. Because we're not paying attention to how it actually feels—especially in contrast to how it feels when it's not there.

I've found it very remarkable: when I can remember to do this, it always feels like being let out of the grip of something. The desire is gripping us. So we begin to see and feel for ourselves, not as an intellectual

concept, but actually experiencing the peace that the Buddha is talking about.

And again, short moments many times. We don't have to frame it in terms of, "Oh, I have to be free of all desire for all time." I hope it happens soon, but most likely it won't. But we can experience, each one of us for ourselves, in these short moments, and that reinforces the understanding.

What makes the Buddha's teaching so powerful is his recognition and pointing out that because our perceptions are conditioned by our mental habits, we can also train our habits and train our perceptions in a way that leads to greater freedom, that leads to greater peace. We can actually train our minds.

Very few people in the world know this, even though hopefully it's obvious to all of you. Most people are living their lives as if, well, this is just how my mind is—probably some mixture of skillful and unskillful. It's only when we really start paying attention inwardly, as you are all doing, that we discover: yes, the mind can be trained. We can let go of those patterns, those ways of perceiving—like "pleasant is good" and "unpleasant is bad"—let go of those ways of perceiving that simply cause suffering to ourselves and others. This itself is a great insight, and it really fuels all of our practice.

So that's one way we can taste the peace of not wanting, of non-reactivity—freeing ourselves from going after the pleasant and pushing away the unpleasant.

Also, in our meditation practice, as it develops in a classical way, there is a stage of practice, a stage of insight, which is called equanimity about formations. This is when the mindfulness and concentration and the other factors of enlightenment are all quite well developed, and the mind can abide in a flow of equanimity for long periods of time. People can spend hours in this place where there is simply no reactivity in the mind.

Ajahn Jumnian, the Thai meditation master, described this state. He said, "At some point the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched, with no interference." That's just a great little reminder. Can we just let everything arise and be there without interfering, without trying to do anything about it? Seen and left untouched, with no interference. "One ceases to focus on any particular content and 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."

So this is possible. This is not some super-attainment of awakening or Buddhahood. This is just the natural development of our meditation practice. We can develop the mind to this extent.

But there's another way to really experience non-reactivity, even before the development of this stage of insight.

And this particular way I've mentioned earlier, last week sometime, is very powerful because this particular way of paying attention really undercuts, in quite a profound way, the very creation of the notion of self.

If you remember, I think I spoke briefly about having the intention in the sitting, but even more so perhaps in walking or as you're moving about, to really pay attention to the quickly passing thoughts. These thoughts—so many thoughts are arising. Many of them are very light. They're not heavy thoughts. They're not particularly disturbing. They come and they go and they pass through. And because they're so light and no big drama, mostly we're not paying attention to them. We hardly even know they're there.

But each of these thoughts, even though it's just maybe for a few seconds at a time, each one of them, when they're unnoticed, is reconditioning our minds in a particular way. It's the creation of the ongoing inner environment in which we live. By themselves, the thoughts are little more than nothing. They're just little passing blips of energy. And that's why it's hard to notice them. We have to have a very specific intention: let me keep an eye out for these. Otherwise they will pass unnoticed.

As I was paying attention in this way to these just lightly passing thoughts, I noticed that light as they were and not that disturbing, the content of most of them was self-referential in one way or another. And so because—or when—we're not noticing them, we are continually through the day reinforcing or recreating this sense of self.

You can see it particularly: this just ongoing, incessant flow of mind worlds is very much fueled by the concepts, the deeply held concepts we have of past and future. If you kept track of the content of your thoughts, my guess is—and I know this from watching my thoughts—maybe ninety percent are either thoughts of the past or thoughts of the future. And who's the star of this past and this future? Moi.

But it's so interesting, and it can be tremendously liberating, if we really look and investigate: what is it that we call past? We think the past has this big reality, but what is it? We have certain thoughts in the moment—memories, remembrances—we put a concept "past," we call that past, and then, with some mental gymnastics, toss the concept back behind us as if the past is a reality back there someplace. But really, all that's happening is that it's a thought in the moment.

And we do the same thing with the future. Planning, imagining, fantasizing—we label all of these kinds of thoughts "future." And then we believe the concept. We give a reality to the concept. We toss it out ahead of ourselves as if there's a future, whereas our only experience of past and future is as a thought in the moment.

This is tremendously liberating to see, because most of us carry the concepts of past and future as a huge burden in our lives. It's like we're carrying mountains on our shoulders—past and future and all the worries and anxieties or hopes or fears or whatever. And all of those are arising because we're not seeing that they're just concepts. They're just a thought in the moment. A thought is very light. It's gone. Past and future.

We can see this. We don't have to be super yogis to see this. We just have to look at the nature of our thoughts, of these particular thoughts.

We can also see our attachment to time with regard to the present. It's not only past and future, so this gets a little more interesting—just because so much of spiritual practice and spiritual language will be: in the present, stay in the present. But even the concept of present can be the cause of a lot of selfing.

We see it particularly, not in thoughts of past and future, but in terms of the comparing mind. Even here, you're on retreat, but obviously you're seeing all these other people here. How often, when we see somebody else here or outside in our lives, does the mind immediately go to a comparison? I'm better than, I'm worse than, I'm the same as.

It can be with reference to physical appearance. It could be with reference to personality. Here on retreat, it could be in reference to the meditation practice itself. Maybe you see somebody who's being exquisitely mindful. "Oh, they're such good yogis. I'm such a bad yogi." And then you see somebody who's walking around in a somewhat casual way. "Oh, I'm such a good yogi. They're such a bad yogi." We're just creating self in that comparison, right here in the present.

The Buddha talks about time in these two ways I mentioned. First he reminds us: past has already gone, future not yet come, abide in the present, not clinging to anything. And then he says—this is in the Dhammapada—"Let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present, and cross over to the further shore." I love that. Let go of the present. So what does that mean?

By paying attention to the quickly passing thoughts that are arising in the mind—whether sitting or walking or moving around—we slowly begin to weaken their conditioning on the mind. All the past thoughts of self, all the future thoughts of self, "I was," "I will be," present thoughts of self in comparing—when we see those thoughts as being just thoughts, we're weakening their power, weakening this conditioning of self.

Yet as seductive as these thoughts are—and as I said, it takes an intention to really become aware of them; you have to set the intention, perhaps at the beginning of a walking period or a sitting or just as you're moving around, "Okay, I'm going to really keep an eye out for these"—then it becomes possible to do it. But as seductive as these thoughts are, even if it's just for a few moments at a time, there is something that we identify with even more than these thoughts. And that is our identification, our creation of a sense of self, through identifying with consciousness, with awareness.

This is even more subtle than identification with thoughts. We identify with the one who's knowing all of this. Who's knowing the thoughts? Who's knowing the sound? It's very easy to become, "Well, I'm the one knowing it all." We might see the passing nature of all these arising phenomena, but then we settle back, we create a little nest, we create a home of self in awareness. "I'm the one knowing."

This is the most fundamental sense of "I am," even more than being identified with our thoughts, our emotions, or our body. It's identifying with consciousness, with awareness—"This is who I really am. I'm the knower, the observer, the witness."

This is what the Buddha said about understanding this "I am": "By rightly understanding 'I am,' one makes an end of suffering. The eradication of 'I am' is the attainment of Nibbāna here and now." This is the most fundamental belief, this is the core belief of self—"I am," the identification with consciousness, with knowing. The eradication of this sense of "I am" is the attainment of Nibbāna here and now. These words of the Buddha point to the importance of understanding this.

As we're doing our practice, we're building all the tools for investigating this "I am," this I am-ness. So the question is, how can we begin to really explore this for ourselves?

One way is to see how this felt sense of "I am," being the knower, is showing itself, is manifesting right in our meditation practice. We think we're meditating, and yet unknowingly we may be reinforcing the I am-ness. When there's a strong sense of being the knower, the observer of experience, very often that sense of "I am" pulls us into an unskillful, ambitious striving. "I am going to get something. I am going to have this new experience." It's all rooted in the belief that there is an "I am" in the first place. And we forget that freedom—and the practice of freedom, moment to moment—is in letting go. It's not in getting.

Freedom, and it's not something far off. Freedom in the moment, what we can practice moment to moment, is in letting go. It's in this rather than in getting something.

But one of the most interesting things I found in my practice is to see how often, in my meditation, I'm in the moment but leaning into the process. Leaning in. It's like an energetic being with this in order for something else to happen. And it can be with something so simple. We can be feeling the breath, but how are we with it? We're with the breath in order to become more concentrated, or in order to be more calm, or in order to feel the next breath.

The Buddha called this craving for becoming. It's like we're in this moment and on some level—sometimes it's very obvious and sometimes it's really subtle—there's just an energetic craving for becoming something. We're waiting for the next moment to fulfill some expectation of a result.

There's a common expression in the suttas, which I mentioned sometime—I think it was last week or this morning. See, past is dissolved. And the older you get, the more it dissolves. That's kind of one of the good things of aging.

This phrase is found often in the suttas. It's the expression people used to express their awakening, their enlightenment. The phrase is: the understanding that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. I spoke of this with regard to impermanence—everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Well, on this recent retreat, this phrase came to mind and I started using it in a different way. It was perhaps the most interesting part of my retreat. Instead of taking it simply as a statement that everything changes, which we all know, I took it as an instruction. As I was just with my moment-to-moment experience, this phrase would come to mind: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And what it did in the moment was cut through the craving for becoming anything. Because whatever would

arise will also pass away. There's nothing to want, there's nothing to crave, because whatever it is that we're wanting or craving, it's just going to pass away like everything else.

The power of the phrase for me in practice, applying it in the practice, was that there was no exception. There was no back door—"well, everything but this," or "everything changes but this is worth craving." No exception. Whatever has the nature to arise.

By bringing that phrase to life, right in the moment-to-moment experience, it was remarkable. There is nothing to want, nothing to lean into, nothing to crave. And for the moment—it's not that it effected some huge super enlightenment—but for the moment, I could really feel that stepping off the wheel, stepping off the wheel of becoming. Because what keeps us on the wheel is craving.

And so the Four Noble Truths became so vivid. Yes, what keeps the whole thing going on a big level and on a moment-to-moment level is just this craving for becoming. In this moment, wanting something else. And the freedom is available in any moment. It's always available, if we remember: oh, whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Just stepping off that wheel of wanting, dropping back. Everything keeps flowing on, but there's no craving or wanting involved. And so we experience that peace, that freedom, even if it's for short moments.

When the Buddha said, "Let go of the present and cross over to the further shore," he's not suggesting that we go someplace. The further shore is in letting go of the craving. And this points us in the direction—or puts us in the field, in the arena—of what the Buddha was pointing to when he used such terms as the unborn, or the unformed, or non-occurrence. We get a feel for what he meant.

This opens up a whole different understanding of what our practice is about. It's not about getting.

It's about letting go.

So I'll just close with this. This is also the Buddha's words from one sutta. We can practice this very profound instruction that the Buddha gave when he said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine." Not the body, not thoughts, not emotions, not sights, not sounds, not awareness, not consciousness itself. That's the letting go of the "I am." Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine.

The sutta goes on to say: whoever hears this has heard all of the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings.

So again, it goes very deep and profound, but all of us can really explore the experience of this in moments. Maybe just for short moments, but if we keep it in mind, it becomes short moments many times. And it really starts to transform our understanding of ourselves and how we're living in the world.

So let's just sit for a few moments and let everything fade away.

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