The Nature of Mind: Intrinsically Empty, Naturally Radiant, Ceaselessly Responsive

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 57:23

There's a word in Pali and Sanskrit that has a lot of meaning for our practice. That word is bodhichitta. Literally, we could translate it as the heart-mind—citta—of awakening—bodhi.

On the relative level, bodhichitta refers to compassion, and particularly to the aspiration that we're not practicing for ourselves alone. We can practice with the aspiration that our own awakening be for the benefit of all beings. By cultivating this aspiration right from the beginning of our practice, it gives a lot of energy. As you're going through different difficulties, you realize that you're going through these not just for yourself, but that your own growing understanding will also benefit everyone else.

In one way or another, we find this compassionate aspiration expressed in many of the Buddhist traditions. Of course, it's central to the Dalai Lama's way of understanding his life and his practice. He wrote something about himself which I find particularly endearing. He said, "Speaking of my own experience, I sometimes wonder why a lot of people like me. When I think about it, I cannot find in myself any specially good quality, except for one small thing. That is the kind heart, which I tried to explain to others and which I do my best to develop myself. Of course, there are moments when I do get angry, but in the depth of my heart I do not hold a grudge against anyone. I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhichitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me I realize how valuable and beneficial it is."

It is endearing. The Dalai Lama, who manifests so much compassion, wonders why a lot of people like him. Well, it's that kind heart—living with that aspiration to benefit all.

The same understanding is found in the Pali Canon. After the Buddha began teaching and when the first sixty disciples had become arahants, he sent them forth with this exhortation. He said, "Go forth, O bhikkhus"—these are monks who had become fully enlightened—"Go forth for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of people and devas. Let not two go by one way. Teach the Dharma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. Proclaim the noble life, altogether perfect and pure. Work for the good of others, you who have done your duty."

So again, it's in all the traditions—this sense that our practice can be motivated by this aspiration to benefit all others. The relative level of bodhichitta is compassion.

On the more ultimate level, it's said that bodhichitta refers to the empty nature of the mind itself. As one teacher expressed it, when compassion and emptiness are both present, enlightenment is unavoidable. These are the two aspects in our practice that we need to cultivate and realize.

One of the great realizations, one of the transforming realizations for me in my own practice, was at a certain point realizing that compassion and emptiness—or compassion and wisdom—are not polarities, but they are expressions of each other. This is our challenge as people: to see how we can integrate the wisdom of emptiness into compassionate responsiveness.

There's one teaching by the Tibetan master Shabkar, who I think was an eighteenth-century Dzogchen master. Beautiful teachings have been passed down from him. There's one verse which he wrote that expresses the unification of relative and ultimate bodhichitta, of compassion and emptiness. He wrote, "The mind's nature is as vivid as a flawless piece of crystal: intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, and ceaselessly responsive."

He's talking about the nature of mind, the nature of our minds—vivid as a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive. Tonight I'd like to talk about these three aspects and how we can actually experience them for ourselves.

How do we understand the term "intrinsically empty"? In English, the term empty or emptiness is really not that appealing. Sometimes we hear the word empty and we might think of it as a kind of blank nothingness or a gray vacuity. It doesn't necessarily inspire us or invite us. But in Pali, in Sanskrit, the word for emptiness is shunyata. Shunyata has many profound meanings in Buddhism—it's a word with tremendous wealth and depth of meaning.

How can we understand shunyata, or emptiness? There are many ways to approach the experience of it. On the very simplest level, we can understand emptiness to mean lack of self-centeredness.

Now usually when we hear the word "self-centered," we think of it as a personality problem—somebody is self-centered and perhaps should see a therapist about it. But there's a deeper meaning to that term. It's when we create a felt sense of self to be at the very center of our lives. Self-centered. Our whole lives revolve around this center of "I" and "me" and "mine." It becomes the reference point for everything we think, everything we feel, everything we sense. It is the felt sense, the idea, the view that there is someone behind experience to whom all experience is happening. That's the deepest meaning of self-centered.

This is our common experience. We view things as "my body, my thoughts, my feelings." "I'm doing, I'm acting, I'm going"—just our normal way of being in the world all centers around this view of self. In that way, to the extent that we do this, we are all self-centered. We're living in the gravitational field of the self-center.

Think about your normal experiences in life—all the hopes, the fears, the worries, the plans. What are they revolving around? They're revolving around some sense of "I," some sense of "mine." This happens in

our meditation practice as well. I spoke about this last week—how often our meditation practice itself is fueled by a desire for becoming something. It's a very strongly rooted habitual conditioning.

It's just so interesting. We revolve around these desires for ever new experiences, even when we know that these experiences are continually changing. It's not a hidden mystery. And it's amazing that we continue to do this throughout our lives, relying on some next experience to finally fulfill us—all the time knowing that it won't and that it can't.

Isn't this strange? It really points to the power, the great power of delusion. Because it's something we know, and yet we keep acting on the belief, on the view, of just the next thing, the next meditation experience, the next whatever.

However, the Buddha offered us some hope out of all this. Through sustained wise attention—which is what you're all cultivating here—through the growing strength and power of mindfulness, of concentration, of wisdom, we begin to pull away from this self-referential orbit. We are gradually drawn into the gravitational field of the Dharma, the zero center of the Dharma, rather than the self-center of "I" and "mine."

This was expressed very succinctly by the Sufi poet Rumi when he wrote, "Live in the nowhere that you come from, even though you have an address here." We're all here, and we have an address—that's the conventional world of self and "I" and "other." We live in that world, and it's not to deny that. But even though we have an address here, can we really live in the nowhere that we come from? Can we live in the realization of emptiness? This is the great challenge: to somehow integrate this conventional level of reality with a more ultimate understanding.

There's a little teaching from a Tibetan teacher which I've read many times, but it gets right to the point. He said, "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. You are real, but you think you're really real. You exaggerate it."

That's it. We are real, we interact, we relate in this ordinary way. But on another level, we're not really real. And that's what our practice can discover and explore.

We can experience this emptiness of self—and we do experience it—in many ways. We can get intimations of it in our ordinary lives. Sometimes people have experiences when they enter into an effortless flow. There's something called a "flow state." It might be in any kind of activity—sports, music, work, nature—where due to some conditions we forget about ourselves and we're just in the flow of experience. Things seem to be flowing on by themselves, without us, and are really much better for that. The flow goes on a lot more easily.

So it's important to pay attention to this, because even in meditation you might have experiences—perhaps sometimes when you're doing walking meditation—where it just seems to be happening by itself. Or in the sitting, where there's just a flow of effortless mindfulness and no one is

doing anything. We begin to get a sense, a feeling of this emptiness of self.

We can become aware of, or be reminded of, emptiness of self sometimes through our teachers, either by their words or even by their presence. I had a very striking example of this, although it has happened with many of my really accomplished teachers and masters. Once when Dipa Ma was visiting—she was this extraordinary woman, this yogi with high levels of realization and concentration. I think I've spoken about her before. She was quite an amazing being, just exuding metta and also emptiness. I remember we were at the retreat center where she was leading a retreat, and I saw her come into the hall and bow before the Buddha. Just watching her do that, it was like wisdom bowing to wisdom, or love bowing to love, or emptiness bowing to emptiness. There was such a sense that there was no one there, no self doing that. Sometimes with people like that we can really get a feeling for, or intuit, this experience of emptiness.

Something I mentioned this morning can also lead us into this experience. I know that during the day you practiced it all with this passive voice construction of just things being known moment after moment. If you do practice that and get easeful with it—at first it may be a little awkward, trying to figure out what he's talking about—but as you practice, it's very simple. It's just experiences being known. You might repeat that to yourself just to get into that groove. Then after a while, it's just happening and there's no one there doing anything. We begin to actualize this experience of emptiness.

We begin to see that there is no thing, no entity that the words "I" or "self" refer to. We use those words conventionally and they're useful—I'm not suggesting that we drop the words. But when we really look to see what it is that they refer to, we see that it's just a convenient designation. It's like using the word "storm." Maybe there's a big summer storm with rain and wind and lightning and thunder. Oh, there's a big storm going on. But is there a storm? Is there something called "storm" apart from the wind and the rain and the thunder and the lightning? No, there's no thing called storm. It's just a convenient designation for this coming together of different conditions.

Look closely at the term "self," which we can use—there's nothing wrong with using the word—but when we look closely, we see it's simply a convenient designation for the changing weather pattern of these mental and physical elements. We could just see all of our experiences as changing weather systems. Sometimes it's a bright, clear, sunny day; sometimes it's a big summer storm; sometimes the black flies are out annoying us. It's just changing weather conditions.

As the practice develops, our refinement of perceiving the changes increases. We begin to see that change is happening incredibly rapidly. We begin to see that nothing lasts long enough to be called self, even within one breath. You might say, "Oh, I'm taking an in-breath." But if we're feeling that in-breath carefully and precisely, the in-breath is not one thing. It is a flow of many, many different sensations. And each one of those microscopic sensations is just arising and passing, arising and passing. Our whole life is like that. It's just that we're not usually seeing it on that level.

The point of practice is not necessarily to always be seeing it on that level. But we want to develop the wisdom, the understanding, that underneath the conventional reality of our lives, something else is going on. Because it's on that level that we free ourselves from attachment to this view of "I," this view of self.

One of the early Western pioneers who went to Asia to practice Vipassana was a woman named Jocelyn King. I was in India in the sixties and seventies; she was probably there in the fifties, very early. She had a great line. She said, "It's better to stand on the firm ground of emptiness than on the quicksand of somethingness."

Mostly we think that somethingness is the firm ground. No—it's better to stand on the firm ground of emptiness, letting go of the notion of self, than on the quicksand of somethingness. But how often do we get lost in the quicksand of our thoughts and emotions and feelings and reactions and judgments? So much of our day, so much of our lives is sinking into that quicksand, forgetting the empty, selfless nature of it all.

This is the beauty of being here, having given yourself this great gift of practice in this fantastic place. Your only job—

Your only job is just to stay aware. And in that, the firm ground of emptiness reveals itself.

Another way of understanding and realizing emptiness—one that becomes very obvious as soon as we start paying attention to it, though we often are not paying attention—is seeing that things, the world, life, is not amenable to our will. This is another meaning of the Pali word *anattā*, usually translated as selflessness. It also means ungovernable.

We cannot, with any hope of success at all, say, "May my body never change. May my body not age. May it never grow ill. May I only have pleasant mind states." It's so obvious that everything is arising due to causes and conditions, not because we want it or don't want it to be a certain way. If things were amenable to our will—"Let me always be healthy. Let me always feel good. Let me always be happy"—but it doesn't work like that. And this is the meaning of *anattā*. This is another meaning of emptiness of self. It's ungovernable. And ungovernable means it's not subject to our will.

It doesn't mean that there are not causes and conditions for things to arise. And so to live in harmony in the world and actually fulfill our aspirations is to understand: well, what are the causes and conditions for the mind to be happy? This is the great gift of the Buddha's teaching. He figured all this out, which is quite astounding. Through his own awareness, it's as if he mapped the mind, he mapped the heart. He said these causes and conditions lead to suffering; these causes and conditions lead to worldly happiness; these causes and conditions lead to awakening, to enlightenment. And he didn't say just believe this. He said try it out, see for yourself.

So this is the great gift of understanding this meaning of emptiness—seeing the importance of understanding the causes and conditions necessary for fulfilling whatever aspirations we have.

Here's an interesting way to test your understanding of this. Somewhat here while you're on retreat, but even more so when you leave here and go about in the world: just pay attention to those situations when things are not going the way you would like them to go. Maybe it's some condition of the body, maybe it's some difficulty in a relationship, maybe it's being at the airport two hours early and then seeing your flight is canceled. In those moments when you're bumping up against the world and the world is not doing what you would like it to do, reflect on that rather than just rebounding into some irritation or aversion or judgment or reaction of some kind. Take those situations to notice that they are happening—whatever the circumstance, whether interpersonally or impersonally—that whatever the situation is, it's arising out of different conditions, not because you want it or don't want it to be a certain way.

Just that understanding brings a sense of ease, a sense of relief. Because the more we understand this particular meaning of emptiness—that things are not amenable to our will but arise out of the appropriate conditions—we let go of the illusion of control. And we can see more clearly what actually are the conditions necessary to accomplish our aims. We see with much greater clarity and take much more effective action.

So we experience emptiness in terms of a flow—we get into a flow state. We experience emptiness sometimes in the presence of a great teacher. We experience the meaning of emptiness when we realize things are not amenable to our will, that they're ungovernable in that sense, that there's no self controlling the world.

There's another meaning of emptiness which is emphasized in certain Buddhist traditions, and that is the empty, space-like nature of the mind. This is from a teaching by Padmasambhava, the great Indian adept who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet. He said: "It is certain that the nature of mind is empty and without any foundation whatsoever. Your own mind is insubstantial like the empty sky. Look at your own mind to see whether this is so or not."

There are many teachings like this, pointing us back to look at the nature of awareness itself. One exercise which I've done and found very revealing is just this: whether in sitting or walking or moving about, in hearing a sound—the sound arises, the sound is being heard—sometimes I'll ask the question in my mind, "Can I find what is knowing the sound?" It's just a way of turning the attention back towards awareness itself.

Can I find what is knowing the sound? And when I look, I see there's nothing to find. As one teacher said, the not finding *is* the finding. That's what's to understand—that the mind in that way cannot be found. And so that's another meaning of emptiness: the empty nature of the mind.

But it's really important here, and we need to take care, not to create some idea of emptiness, not to create some concept about it and then get attached to the concept. Somebody came to one teacher and was describing a very empty, spacious quality of mind. They were having what most people—not you, but what most people—would call a good sitting. Open, empty, spacious. And so she was reporting this to the

teacher. He could see that there was some attachment to that state, some reification of it. "Oh, this is emptiness."

And he said—making a very interesting distinction here—that a better description than spaciousness for the experience of emptiness is *groundlessness*. When I heard that, I thought, that really cuts through attachment to any state. Because yes, it's lovely when the mind is spacious. We all may have had that experience. But that's just another state. It's a very pleasant state, but it's a state. It's a conditioned arising. Whereas the term groundlessness, at least for me, just cuts through attachment to anything. It's like the ground falls away. And that gives a better flavor of what the experience of emptiness is.

So in this practice—in the direct looking at the empty nature of the mind—it's not so much deconstructing the sense of self by seeing all the component elements of what we call self, but rather it's looking directly, or seeing directly, the empty nature of the mind.

The mind is vivid like a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty. But it's not just empty. Shabkar went on to say: intrinsically empty, *naturally radiant*. That's another aspect or quality of the mind. And radiant here means this innate capacity of the mind to know, the capacity of awareness. As I mentioned, I think maybe this morning, the cognizing power of emptiness. It's not just empty space; the mind actually has the capacity to be aware.

Buddhadasa, the great Thai master of the last century, said we should really call mind "emptiness" because of its space-like nature, but because of the awareness faculty, we call it mind. So this is important. The mind is not just empty space. It has this knowing-aware quality.

This union of emptiness and awareness is an important understanding. The nature of the mind is this union of emptiness and awareness. It was expressed in the first lines of a book I came across. I was in a bookstore and I came across this title: *The Nothing That Is*. I didn't know what the book was about, but the title was so intriguing—*The Nothing That Is*—that sounds really Buddhist. It turns out that the book, by Robert Kaplan, is a history of the number zero. Robert Kaplan was a mathematician at Harvard, and zero was a late discovery, a very powerful idea and concept.

These are the opening lines of the book, the first two lines: "Look at zero and you see nothing. Look through it and you see the world."

That's our practice. Look at the mind and you see nothing. There's nothing to find. Look through it and you see the world.

That's as far as I got in the book. It soon got very technical.

What's important in this realization is that this nature of mind—this union of emptiness and awareness—is not something we have to get. This *is* the nature of mind. It's something we need to recognize and come back to as we free ourselves from the hindrances, free ourselves from delusion.

We let go of all our various and subtle attachments.

Realizing this really can change the way we practice. Instead of practicing with an ambitious striving to get something, we recognize that the nature of mind is already empty and already aware. But we don't always see that. Why? The Buddha said it very directly: "Luminous, bhikkhus, is the mind. It is defiled by incoming defilements. Luminous is the mind. It is freed from incoming defilements"—or visiting defilements. The important point here is that the defilements which obscure the mind are not intrinsic to it. They're visitors; they come when the conditions are there.

If we learn how to recognize the nature of awareness, the empty nature of awareness, it's already here. In my own practice, especially when I would find myself caught up in striving—sometimes very obvious, sometimes really subtle, sometimes just a kind of leaning into the next moment—I would use the mantra "already here" or "already aware." Just those couple of words would remind me to settle back. It's already here. I simply need to be aware of what's arising, not to get something. And the whole system relaxes.

One image that describes this movement from delusion to awareness is the image of ice and water. Ice is hard, frozen, solid. Ice is the mind when we're caught up or identified with a thought, a feeling, an emotion, our story. You can feel that sense of contraction when we are lost, when we are identified with the movies of our minds. Water is free-flowing. Water is the mind when it's not identified, not attached, not caught—just in the flow of phenomena arising and passing away. Empty phenomena rolling on.

Now the big secret—ready? This is the big secret: water is nothing other than melted ice. The free flow of water, the free flow of experience, is not some far-off attainment. "One day I'll be water and just be freely flowing"—no. Water is nothing other than melted ice. Even with all these thoughts and emotions and stories, as soon as we see them for what they are, the ice melts and we're back in the free flow of experience.

You've all had this experience many times. Pay attention the next time you're caught up in some story—probably it will happen sometime before you leave. The next time the mind is caught up, notice that moment when you come out from being lost, when you remember: "Oh, all of that, that whole big drama I was caught up in, that I had such strong feelings and emotions about—it was nothing more than just some thoughts and feelings in the mind." It had been ice, and it melted, and you're right back in the flow.

It's just so amazing, the power of unnoticed thoughts. When we're not aware that they are just thoughts, we are lost in the movies of our minds, living in this mind-created world. And then we wake up from it. It's like coming out of a movie theater. We may have been totally involved in the story of the film, then we step out of the theater and there's that sense of the mind enlarging. "Oh, there's a bigger reality." We realize that nothing in the movie theater was really happening.

I find this whole thing amazing. I really do. It's very good to have a sense of humor about all this, because

as I said earlier, in Tsoknyi Rinpoche's phrase, so much of our suffering is real but not true. It's not that the suffering isn't there—when we are caught in the story, we are suffering.

But the potential for freedom is always there. And it's not twenty years down the road—it's right in this moment of simply seeing what's happening. It's like being in a prison cell where the door is always unlocked. At any moment, we can step out. There's nothing keeping us there except our not seeing.

So that's why what you're doing here is so powerful, just spending all day practicing seeing—getting lost and waking up, getting lost and waking up, over and over again, and observing that very process. It's tremendously liberating.

Ceaselessly Responsive

Intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive—this is the nature of mind. So what does "ceaselessly responsive" mean?

In the open, empty awareness, there is a natural and spontaneous compassionate response to the world and to the people around us. It's like water flowing down a mountainside. The water will find the most direct way—which doesn't always mean straight down—but according to the contours of the land, the water will find the shortest way down the mountain.

As we move out of the orbit of self-centeredness into the gravitational field of the empty center, the gravitational field of the Dharma, of emptiness, we find that there is a spontaneous responsiveness to situations. We begin to have a very active engagement in the world, responding to the suffering that's there—our own and others'—in a much more open and compassionate way. We begin to respond in whatever way seems appropriate, in whatever way is possible.

This can show itself, and does show itself, in many ways in our lives. It's a beautiful part of our unfolding practice to see in ourselves and in others a growing compassionate response to different situations.

There's a story of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese leader, when she was under house arrest—which lasted something like seventeen years. She was having an interview with an Australian newspaper, and the journalist asked, "Don't you want to bring the generals down?" She replied, "No, I want to bring them up." Here were people doing terrible things in the country, and yet her compassionate response to that situation was: "No, I don't want to bring them down. I want to bring them up. I want to elevate their understanding."

Sometimes the responsiveness can manifest in very small ways. The emptier we are of self, of self-reference, it may be small gestures of friendliness or kindness or generosity. We shouldn't overlook these very small moments in our lives. The Dalai Lama said, "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend. This gives me a genuine feeling of happiness. It is the practice of compassion." Such a simple statement: I try to treat everyone I meet as an old friend.

Then we think of our own responses to everyone we meet. Probably, at least at times—maybe not often, but at least at times—how many judgments come in, how many projections, likes and dislikes, even before we actually say anything to them. This is the habit of mind. Can we create a new habit?

Compassion can also manifest as times of great courage or determination. Think of truly exceptional beings like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela, in situations of immense suffering. I used to watch films of Dr. King leading marches, both in the North and the South, often surrounded by people filled with hatred. And he was holding the space of love. It was amazing to see that potential, that possibility.

And the story of Mandela—when he came out of prison and became the first president post-apartheid, it is astounding. I had taught in South Africa. It is amazing that country did not erupt in violent civil war, given the oppression and cruelty that had happened there. But he held the space of reconciliation. This is the potential of compassionate response—requiring great courage and determination—in the midst of tremendous difficulty.

There's a teacher in California named Lou Richmond. Some years ago, he contracted a terrible disease: viral encephalitis, a brain virus. It was terrible. He was really on the verge of death, in a coma for two weeks.

He suffered brain damage and other disabilities. He said it took him three to four years to recover from this illness, and many people don't.

He had been a Zen teacher and still is, and this is what he wrote after his illness: "Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddha's teaching, I say this: everything is connected, nothing lasts, you are not alone."

This is really just a restatement of the three marks of existence—impermanence, not-self, and suffering. But it's very interesting how he described the truth of dukkha: you are not alone. He said, "I don't think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as 'you are not alone' before my illness. But now I find that talking about it that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer in one way or another and at different times means we are all in the same boat. And that's what allows us to feel compassion."

It's the universality of this truth, the universality of the truth of dukkha, of suffering, expressed as "you are not alone." When we remind ourselves of that, it really opens the heart to compassion for ourselves and for others.

In understanding compassion and how it's the natural responsiveness of the heart, of the mind, it's important not to create a hierarchy of compassionate action—thinking this action is really compassionate and this is just moderately compassionate. The field of compassionate responsiveness is limitless. It's the field of suffering beings, and we each find our own way in it. We each find our own way in expressing this compassion. Sometimes it might be active engagement with the world. Sometimes it might mean sitting in

a cave for twenty years, practicing to awaken with the aspiration for the benefit of all. And if you don't want to sit in the cave for twenty years, you could sit here for twenty years. That could be as compassionate an action as being on the front lines of social action. There's no hierarchy.

Think of the bodhisattva. How many lifetimes did he spend as a solitary renunciate? You can just imagine his parents, relatives, people saying, "What is that guy doing? He's just selfish, sitting in a cave by himself for all these years." And yet, after all those lifetimes of practice flowering in the awakening of Buddhahood, we're here today because of the flowering of that compassion. So we must be careful not to judge or discriminate. It all has to do with the motivation and the aspiration in the heart.

The mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal—intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, and in its aware quality, ceaselessly responsive. The more we recognize the innate empty wakefulness of mind, the more the compassionate responsiveness comes forth. And the more we practice compassion free of self-reference, the more we recognize its empty nature.

I'll close with this wonderful teaching from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the truly great Tibetan masters of the last century. He said, "When you recognize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena"—which is what we're all doing here—"the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

This is the union of relative and ultimate bodhichitta. Compassion is the activity of emptiness. And this is really the great work that we're all doing here.

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