Compassion & Equanimity in Difficult Times, Daylong Retreat: Afternoon

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:06:25

This morning I mentioned how the visual field is probably the predominant sense field in which we live, and we're often not mindful of the fact that we're seeing. But really there's a sense field that's even more predominant than seeing, which I want to talk about this afternoon because it plays such an amazingly critical role in our lives and our relationships: the whole realm of thought.

In the Buddhist scheme of things, the mind is considered the sixth sense, so it's really just like another sense field. But instead of an external sense object like sounds or sights or smells, the object of this sense sphere is thought. Thought is the object of mind.

There is so much to say about thought, because for the most part, thoughts run our lives. One of the most extraordinary things to first learn about thought—and there are many things to explore—is to realize how much of the time we're lost in thought. If you go up to somebody on the street who's never meditated and ask, "Are you lost in your thoughts?" they'd probably say, "Oh no, not too much." But anybody who's ever meditated knows that probably a good part of the time we're lost in thought and carried away. We hop on these trains of association. We don't even know that we've hopped on the train. We don't know where the train is going. And then some time later—it could be a minute or two, it could be five minutes, it could be half an hour, sometimes we mull things over for days—we realize we were just lost in these trains of thought, not knowing that we're thinking. We are lost in that mind world.

It's almost like when we go to the movies and get totally absorbed in the story. Of course, the point of going to the movies is to do just that—we do want to get lost. And in that time, we forget that we're just watching a movie. Nothing is really happening. Nobody's getting chased and nobody's falling in love and nobody's getting killed. It's just pixels of light on the screen. But it's so realistic that we get caught up in the story with all the attendant emotions. You know that feeling when you come out of a movie theater and there's almost a little reality shift: "Oh yeah, that was just a movie."

Well, this is happening to us throughout our day countless times. We are getting caught up and lost in the movies of our minds with all the attendant—and sometimes very strong—emotions, forgetting that it is just a thought.

Munindraji, my first teacher, had a really wonderful line. He said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother, it's a thought." But we forget that. We're having these thoughts and we take them to be the thing itself or the person itself, rather than simply a thought in the mind. To a very large extent, we're living in

these mind-created worlds that are not actually happening other than happening as a thought. That's really what's happening.

I know you've all had this experience countless times, but it's particularly striking to me when I'm outside going for a walk. It may be a beautiful day with beautiful surroundings, and then the mind will get caught up in some train of thought, some train of association. It may be three steps, five steps, ten steps where I'm not in the experience of where I am at all. I'm in that mind-created world. And then something will snap in the mind—"Oh yeah, I'm just here"—and the contrast between those two experiences is so dramatic. It's so clear that the mind had been lost to the reality of what was actually there and lost in the thought.

So it's incredibly important, not only for meditation but for our lives, that we begin to practice becoming aware that we're thinking. What's really important here is understanding that the idea is not necessarily to stop thinking. There may come times when the concentration deepens and we go through periods where thoughts are a lot less, or even the mind is free of thought for a while. But that's not really the point—that can happen. The idea in practice, especially in insight or Vipassana practice, is that when a thought arises, we become aware as close to the beginning as possible that we're thinking. Thought becomes simply another object of meditation, like a sound. We don't try to stop sounds from happening. The sound comes, we're just aware of hearing, it goes, and there's no problem. If we can be aware of thought in just that same way—a thought arises, we're aware that we're thinking, it disappears—there's no problem, no matter what the thought is.

A few things to really pay attention to as we sit with an emphasis on being aware of thoughts. One thing that I found particularly helpful: we'll be sitting and being in the body, feeling the body breathing, sounds, sensations—everything we did this morning.

And then thoughts will arise and often carry us away for some longer or shorter period of time. The tendency is, as soon as we become aware that we're thinking, to jump back to the body or the breath—"Oh, I shouldn't be thinking, coming back."

I think it's much more helpful to actually take a moment in that very moment of waking up from being lost in the thought. That moment is very revealing. That's an important moment because we've just gone, you could say, from being asleep to being awake, or from delusion to wisdom. We've been lost and then we're not lost.

So that very moment of transition is showing us experientially and immediately what the awake, aware mind is like—because we've just gone from being unaware to aware. If we highlight that moment, if we take a moment to reflect on it or just acknowledge it: "Oh, this is wakefulness. This is what wakefulness means." And it becomes so clear in contrast to the moment before when we were lost.

In the many, many times that you'll be lost and then awaken—and the good news here, which people often miss, is that for as many times as you get lost in thought, that many times do you awaken. But mostly

people focus on the having been lost, and then a judgment arises: "Oh, I'm lost again. I can't meditate." Instead of: "Oh, I'm awake again. This is awakening. I'm closer to freedom."

Reframe or give emphasis to that moment of waking up. And that will happen as many times as you've been lost. This gives an uplift to the meditation rather than a self-judgmental, critical attitude for having been lost. So highlight that moment; don't jump over it. Really take a moment to see what that's like, to contrast the difference so you're really getting it. This is wakefulness; that was delusion. It becomes very real for us what these terms mean.

The second thing which I found extremely fascinating with regard to thought is when there is a thought train going on and there's enough mindfulness to know that it's happening—like we're not totally lost in it, but for some reason there's a strong energy for it. You've probably had that experience, when the thoughts are going and you kind of know you're thinking, but you're still on the train.

A question that I have found extremely profound and beneficial is to ask: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is a thought as a phenomenon? Because it is extremely mysterious. These thoughts are arising—we have thousands of them, maybe tens of thousands a day. So it's a common experience for almost everybody. And yet almost nobody really asks the question: What is a thought? What is it as a phenomenon?

When we ask this question as a thought train is happening, it's fascinating, because when we really look—what is a thought?—we see that it's almost nothing. It's just like a little energy blip in the mind. It's so insubstantial; there's not much there.

And yet, when we are unaware that we're thinking, these thoughts have so much power. They are like little dictators in the mind. The thoughts say go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced. They're running our lives. Thoughts are running our lives, and often in a very uncritical way. The thoughts are conditioned by the various circumstances of our lives. We have the kinds of thoughts we do because of certain kinds of conditioning. If we're not aware that we're thinking, all that's happening is we're playing out the patterns of our conditioning. There's very little space for choice or freedom there. We're just acting out the thought patterns.

All of this is so remarkable because when we are aware enough to even just poke at it a little bit and ask, "What is a thought? What is this dictator in the mind?"—there's nothing there, hardly anything there. And so it really opens up a place of tremendous freedom and tremendous possibility. As we notice different patterns of thoughts, when we really understand their essential emptiness, their transparency, and we have a little bit of mindfulness, there's the possibility of making choices.

Is this thought worth cultivating? Is this thought helpful? Is this thought not helpful? Is this thought just causing a lot of suffering and confusion?

When we understand that thoughts are not fixed, that they're not solid, that they're not in some essential

way who we are—when we see that they're just conditioned phenomena, quite empty of substance yet very, very seductive—that's where the challenge lies. Thoughts slip into the mind. They're not as impactful as a sound or a sensation, so they slip in and we hardly know they're there. They're very sneaky.

The thoughts sneak in, take over the mind, we're lost in them, we act out whatever they're saying, and then we find ourselves in all kinds of situations—sometimes helpful, but frequently not helpful—all because we haven't trained ourselves to really watch our minds, to watch out for thoughts arising. Again, this doesn't mean that thoughts stop coming. It means that we're aware that they've arisen. We're thinking. Just a thought.

Do you get a sense of how powerful this practice can be? It really can transform our lives because we are empowering ourselves to make choices about which thoughts are worth cultivating and which thoughts are worth letting go of. Without mindfulness, without attentiveness to this, we're just playing out whatever particular patterns of conditioning may be present.

The key element in working with thoughts in this way—and this is an element that has helped me so much in my practice in all aspects, but particularly with thoughts—is interest. It's simply taking interest in this phenomenon, because it is interesting. Something that should be so empty when we're aware of it has so much power when we're not aware of it. To me, that's a very interesting situation. This interest can lend energy to really paying attention, being very aware, practicing the awareness of thought.

Needless to say, we miss them many, many times. We get lost over and over again. But even when we get lost, pay attention to that moment when we do wake up from being lost, and highlight what that quality of awareness is like. That will reinforce the possibility of being aware of thought sooner—the more we connect with what the quality of awareness is actually like.

This is a huge field of practice and understanding, and a huge source of potential happiness in our lives.

So let's practice it for a bit. Again, we can start in the same way as we practiced this morning. As a way of settling in: there is a body. Just settling into that in an open, relaxed way. And in that space created by "there is a body," simply being open to what your experience is—the experience of the sensations of the body breathing, the experience of other sensations, really noticing whether they're pleasant or unpleasant and your reactions to them.

Set a strong intention to be aware of thoughts or images. Everything I said also applies to pictures or images in the mind; it's the same process. Have a strong intention to really be alert, to keep the radar out for the arising of thought or image. You might notice when in the thought process you do become aware. Is it at the beginning? Is it in the middle? Is it after it's already over?

If there is a train of thought going on and you're a little bit aware, you might ask that probing question: well, what is a thought? Look directly at it so you're really seeing the very nature of thought—not the content, but thought as a phenomenon.

We'll sit for about fifteen minutes. Enjoy the exploration.

As soon as you become aware of a thought or image, it might be helpful to make a soft mental note of acknowledgment—just "thinking," "seeing"—as a way to reinforce the awareness of it.

A student asked: "My question is, who am I if I'm not my thoughts? And when do thoughts disguise themselves as intuition or having a hunch? Is there a difference between the two?"

I think a better frame for that first question—one that gives a better handle for the investigation—is not "who am I" but "what am I." The "who" already carries an implication that there is a "who" that I am, and I just have to find it.

We don't tend to do that with the what. With the what, it's more that the question frames it in terms of exploration. Well, what's here? What's here in experience that might be me? I think just that difference of frame will help.

As you make that exploration—and all of vipassana insight meditation is really the exploration of that question—we begin to see that, contrary to expectations, there is really no one behind this process, this changing mind-body process, to whom the process belongs. So really the answer to that question is not a substantial either what or who. Rather, what we're calling "I" or calling "self" is a changing process. It's a flow. It's a flow of experience. We tend to think that the flow is happening to someone, and that's who I am. What begins to reveal itself in the course of practice is that there is no one behind the process to whom it's happening—that what we're calling self *is* the process. So that's a very short answer to a three-hour dharma talk.

What was the second question?

The second question is whether intuition or having a hunch is sometimes thought in disguise.

Sure. To say that thought is insubstantial and has no real substance is not to say that thoughts have no meaning. Thoughts carry a lot of meaning. Sometimes they're true, sometimes they're not true. Sometimes they're imbued with wisdom and understanding. Sometimes they're just the reflection of delusion. So intuition can very much come as a thought—not always, sometimes it's a feeling—but it can often come as a particular thought in the mind. And the more we're paying attention to our thoughts and to their quality in the mind, we begin to get a feel for the different kinds of thoughts that are arising. We begin to get a feel for what's an intuitive understanding versus what's just repeating old neurotic patterns.

When I was in India many years ago, very often I would have this intuition of when it was about to rain and I should take in the laundry. I learned to listen to that thought, and it was almost always right. There are more important intuitions than that, of course, but it did show that possibility.

And sometimes in meditation, insight itself is intuitive. We can be sitting and just doing what we've been doing—in the body, feeling the breath and sensations, noticing different thoughts—and all of a sudden, just from the quality of paying attention, very intuitively there can be a new understanding of something. That understanding is really intuitive; it's not something we thought out. It just came out of the matrix of our attention. And then it's there, and sometimes something very profound is understood. So intuition can definitely be a kind of thought that's really helpful.

Generally, for most people, the ratio of useless thoughts to intuitions is not fifty-fifty. Maybe for some unusual people it is.

Question: First, thank you very much for your teaching. I have some challenge understanding the difference between working with thoughts and working with emotions. I know that when I recognize an anxious thought, I say hi to it and I can let it go. It's difficult sometimes because when anxiety comes up, often it's after a little while that I wasn't aware of my anxious thoughts. And in my Thich Nhat Hanh tradition practice, we are used to when an emotion like anxiety comes up, taking care of it like a child. But when do I let go of my anxious thoughts and when do I take care of them?

That's a topic I'm going to discuss after the walking period, because working with emotions is the next big piece of the practice. So why don't you wait until then and see if it's answered in the discussion, and if not, we can address it more specifically. But that question is very much at the heart of how we work with emotions and the relation of thought to emotion, which is really interesting.

Just as a preview to that discussion: I find it totally interesting that I can be sitting, everything's peaceful, and I may have a thought of something that happened, maybe something that was unpleasant or difficult. So I'm just sitting, minding my own business, this thought comes of a difficult situation or a difficult person, and often immediately the thought will trigger an emotion.

It's like the thought arises, and the emotion is immediately there—whatever it is: annoyance or anger or irritation, or love, which could be a positive emotion. But I just get fascinated by what just happened. Because it was just a thought. It was just this little bit of nothing which triggered a storm. It's pretty interesting. So that's just one little comment on it. But we'll talk more about emotion.

Question: I'm understanding how to accept, and I'm understanding how to act. What I'm having trouble with is the doubt I feel about my own discernment between the two—when to accept something and when to feel it's time to act. Sometimes I feel regret because I'm not sure I made the right decision, not sure if I'm trusting myself about when to act and when to accept.

I'm a little confused by that dichotomy, because acceptance is the first step whether we act or we don't act. Acceptance is a necessary component of discernment. In other words, we have to accept what's there. We have to see what's there. Then the next step is seeing whether whatever it is—whether it's a thought to act

or anything else—after we accept the fact that it's there, we're not covering it or pushing it away. We're seeing, yes, this is here. Then we need to discern: is it wholesome or is it unwholesome? We need to really examine our motivation behind the potential action. Is the motivation compassion? Is it greed? Is it aversion? It's based on that discernment that we then make the choice: do I act on it, or do I let it go?

So acceptance underlies all of it, because acceptance is simply, yes, this is here. The discernment begins to see the difference between skillful and unskillful, or wholesome and unwholesome. And that's the whole investigation of motivation, which itself is a hugely interesting area of our lives to investigate, because our motivations can be very subtle.

I think most of us are probably basically good people, and probably most of us have the belief that our motivations are basically good. Basically. But there are a lot that aren't. There's a book—this goes way back, I think it came out in the sixties, so some of you may be familiar with it—*Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis. There was one line where it says, "Self-knowledge is always bad news." There's good news to it too, but a lot of meditation is seeing the bad news, meaning we're seeing a lot of the motivations that are not so skillful. But this is tremendously important. It's much better to see that than not see it, to be living in delusion that all of our motivations are good and therefore I should just act on them.

So having the courage, really, and the interest to take a look before you act—and then to question whether I should act or shouldn't act—really depends on the motivation. And it's difficult because sometimes they're mixed. Probably very few of us are saints with totally pure motivation, and we can often see that some aspects are really wholesome while others are not.

Follow-up: This relates to something you said last night about how we feel like we have control over things, but actually most of it is circumstance and cause—things happen, and we're not actually the ones that cause these things to happen. So when I'm trying to discern whether to act or not, is the acceptance just saying, "Oh, this is just what it is, just accept it and don't do anything"?

No. To say that everything arises out of causes and conditions is not to say that we are not part of that flow of causes and conditions. We can't control it, because there are many causes and conditions at work. But in many situations, we can influence the outcome of things. It takes some wisdom in those situations to say, okay, is this something where I can actually have an influence, or not?

I wouldn't assume that just by saying it's all causes and conditions, we don't have a part to play—because sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. But if we do have a part to play, then it's important to really see: what is our motivation for playing that part?

The difference between influence and control—that's an important distinction to understand.

Someone then raised a question about interest and boredom. They found the practice very profound when they first heard about it, but one of their challenges was getting bored with going back and examining every thought. And it wasn't only in this practice—in vipassana, in the breath exercise, they

would get bored with the practice. What advice might help face that challenge?

There are many pieces of advice I could offer here. The first is to understand what boredom actually is, because most people, I think, have the idea that boredom resides in the object. The breath is boring. Or this walking—you know, people doing walking meditation, just back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. It's so boring. But really, boredom has nothing to do with the object.

Fritz Perls, who was the founder of Gestalt psychology, had such a good definition of boredom. He said boredom is lack of attention. It's not the object. Boredom has to do with the quality of attention we're bringing to the object.

So instead of seeing boredom as a problem, you can see boredom as feedback. You could actually welcome it. When you're bored, you can be thankful, because that's telling you, "Oh, the quality of my attention right now has fallen away from the object. The attention is half-hearted." And because the attention is half-hearted, it's boring.

Then, as an experiment, with whatever you're doing—whether it's the breath, whether it's walking, whether it's attention to some external situation—see what happens if, in recognizing that, you intentionally bring your mind in close to whatever the object is, to the breath or to a step. My experience, and that of many others, is that as soon as the attention gets very close to the object, the boredom disappears.

That's why you can see people doing walking meditation on retreat, walking for half an hour, forty-five minutes, an hour, just lifting, moving, placing. From the outside, it's the most boring thing in the world. But when the attention is close, it is the most compelling thing in the world.

So that's one piece—to examine what boredom is telling you, and then to see if you can actually bring the attention in close.

But what if you don't realize you're bored until after half an hour, and only then you realize, "Oh, this is very boring"?

This is an interesting case. I would say that if you don't realize you're bored until after half an hour, you were not bored for that half hour. Maybe the last two minutes you were bored, and then you're projecting it backward. Because if you were bored for that whole half hour, you would know it much earlier.

In some way, you were there doing it, and then it could very well be that after half an hour or so, your energy gets lower. It's not so much boredom as low energy, and then you're interpreting that low energy as, "Oh, this was so boring," instead of recognizing, "No, I was there for that time, and now all of a sudden it's tiresome or burdensome."

Well, that's quite normal. We do have energy swings, ups and downs. It might be at that time—and there are lots of ways to work with energy—but maybe that's the time to get up from the sitting and do some

walking, or change the activity, just as a way of raising the energy.

We have to be careful. The mind is very tricky. Meditation really reveals that. We often misinterpret different feelings. And that sounds to me like what's happening—that you're calling perhaps some minutes of low energy "boredom" and then extrapolating it back over all that time.

I'm going to talk more about misinterpreting emotions in the next part.

But really, when you do become aware that you're bored, even if it's earlier than half an hour, really play with that sense of... And this is a great skill in meditation. We actually have the ability to change the quality of our attention. Sometimes our attention is just half-hearted, casual, as I said. So then it gets boring because we're not fully there. But it's possible to actually bring the mind in close. Let me feel this closely. And by doing that, I think you would notice a change.

Why don't we take maybe twenty minutes for another walking exercise. I want to suggest two things in this walking. First, just give emphasis to the practice you did in the sitting. As you're doing the walking, however you're doing it, really keep an eye out for the arising of thoughts. Just notice, and you'll see very clearly in the walking how you'll be walking and then five steps later you realize you haven't been there—you've been lost in some mind-created world.

I have found it really interesting to remind myself at that time that this is not just having been forgetful, that it actually was the creation of a mind-created world. So that concept I get more familiar with, because a good part of our life's experience are simply mind-created worlds and not what's actually happening.

You can see this hugely when you're doing the walking. Pay attention to this aspect. A good many of our mind-created worlds are about past and future. Whatever we're thinking about the past is not happening now. And whatever we're thinking about the future is not happening now, other than as a thought. It's fine to have these thoughts of past and future if we know that we're thinking. But to be lost in them and to not know is simply to be lost in a mind-created world where we're not attentive to where we actually are.

So in this walking period, keep an eye out for that, because they will certainly arise. As well as perhaps the feeling of boredom. "Oh, five minutes. Oh, I have fifteen more minutes to go." See what happens when you, if you feel that, bring the mind in closer to whatever it is you're feeling. The step, the movement, seeing, a sound. There's a lot to discover.

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