Compassion and Equanimity in Difficult Times, Daylong Retreat: Morning

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 2:10:41

It's good to be with all of you here again. I guess many of you were here last night as well. The idea for today is to have it more of a practice day.

As you know, there are many different styles of meditation and many different nuances of instructions. My own temperament leads me to synthesize the different suggestions and techniques that I've found helpful. So today you'll be getting something of a mishmash—a way of practice. Most of it will be familiar to you.

But I'd like to emphasize today not only the technique or techniques of mindfulness—what it is that we should be paying attention to—but also what we learn from being mindful. Because mindfulness is really just the first step. It's becoming attentive to what's arising. And as we saw last night, there are many nuances to how we're being attentive. Are we being attentive with openness? Are we being attentive with aversion? Are we being attentive with grasping?

We want to really see and examine, to establish a baseline of mindfulness or awareness with whatever's arising, along with that balance of mind, that openness of mind, that equanimity that's not pushing things away, that's not holding on. And then from that place of balanced awareness, what is it that we're learning? What are we seeing about the nature of our experience? Because that's the wisdom piece. Mindfulness gets us there, and then when we look through being mindful, we begin to see the deeper nature of our experience—of all the things that are arising, how they're arising, at different levels.

During the day I'll point at various times to both classical insights that arise for everybody, but also some things that I have been noticing and practicing in my own meditation over these last years. When I go on retreat, almost always there's some new angle, some new understanding that arises. Maybe it's from just a single line in a text that I might have read many times, but this time it takes on a new meaning and transforms my practice in a certain way. So I'd like to share some of those during the course of the day and see if they're helpful for you as well.

We'll begin as we began last night, taking a comfortable seated posture. One advantage of this kind of seating is that if it's reasonably comfortable for you, you can really relax. You can settle back into a certain ease of posture, at the same time maintaining a certain quality—I call it a quality of dignity. So you're not just slumping over. You're sitting, and you might be quite comfortable and relaxed, but it feels as if the spine is upright and there's a quality of alertness in the mind and in the body.

The phrase I use in describing the practice is to be relaxed but not casual. There's a certain intentionality to how we're sitting.

As a preface to these first instructions: very often meditation instructions in Vipassana, insight meditation, begin with the body and the breath. This is very common because it's very noticeable—a very easy object of experience to connect with. We all have bodies and we can all feel the body, and everybody breathes until they don't. So this is a very basic, fundamental way of establishing mindfulness.

But there are different ways of attending to the breath, and I wanted to mention two of them. You can experiment with both.

As we settle into the body, there is a phrase in the Buddha's discourse on the foundations of mindfulness—in Pali it's called the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This is the fundamental teaching on mindfulness. There's one phrase in it that a few years ago jumped out at me while I was on retreat. I started using it in a different way and it changed how I practiced.

The Buddha says: be mindful—and then, as if it's a direct statement—"there is a body," to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness.

There are two elements in that instruction. One is—and this is what I found so helpful—to actually use the phrase silently in the mind, occasionally: "There is a body. There is a body. There is a body."

And I found it very helpful as a way of simply and very gently reminding the attention: yes, there is a body. Just settle into the body. It's nothing complicated. It's nothing you need fantastic concentration for. It's just that awareness. There is a body.

That phrase provides a frame—the awareness of the body—within which to then be aware of whatever is arising. And this is one of the differences in how we can attend to the breath. Because when we say "there is a body," at a certain point you will be feeling, you'll be noticing, that the body is breathing. That's part of what's happening in the body.

Now generally, classically, the instructions have been to zero in on the breath, to really narrow the attention, to feel very precisely the rising and falling of the abdomen or the in and out at the nose. We can feel this kind of effort to narrow the attention just to the breath. And this is a good way to practice. It really develops a strong and fine one-pointedness in that narrowness of attention.

But I also found it very revealing and helpful at times not to narrow the attention, but to keep the wider frame—there is a body—and then simply, within that frame, be aware that the body is breathing. So there's not a zeroing in on the breath. We're keeping the wider context, but within that, the feeling of the body breathing also becomes clear.

Is this difference clear? I think it would be interesting just for you to experiment and see. Because I had been doing so many years of the narrowing of attention, I found it very helpful and revealing to not

narrow the attention, to keep the frame of the whole body, and to do that by repeating the phrase occasionally: there is a body. Not every moment, but periodically—there is a body—and then simply settling in and feeling the body breathing within that.

It may be that you'll find it's both more relaxed and that there is less tendency to influence the breath in some way. Because sometimes when we're zeroing in and narrowing the attention on the breath, unconsciously we may be pulling it a little bit, or pushing it, or influencing how we're breathing in a very subtle way. But if we're using "there is a body," just settling back and allowing the body to breathe, you may find that there's less of that influence and the breath just becomes a natural function of the body sitting here.

So I'd like to have some time for you to experiment with this, so you get a taste of this possibility. And then there are many things that can be discovered once you have some feeling for this particular way of practice.

Are there any questions just about this instruction, not about anything else? Is it clear?

Okay, so we'll sit for about ten or fifteen minutes. I'll occasionally just repeat a few words reminding you.

Sit and begin. Just sit and know you're sitting. Intermittently use the phrase "there is a body" as a way of settling into the feeling of the whole body. And within that frame, but not zeroing in on it, be aware of the body breathing. The body breathes in. The body breathes out.

Within the larger space—there is a body—in addition to feeling the body breathing, you may also be aware of different sounds. The ambient sounds in the room, the sound of my voice. Let them also be simple arisings in that space of awareness, contained in the frame: there is a body. It's all arising effortlessly. The body breathing. Different sounds.

When you notice the mind wandering, getting lost in a thought or an image, as soon as you become aware of the mind wandering, simply notice that and come back to the awareness of the body sitting. There is a body. Re-establishing the connection. There is a body. Feeling the body breathing. Aware of different sounds.

Be mindful there is a body, just to the extent necessary for clear knowing. Be aware of it clearly, to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness. If you can sustain the awareness—there is a body, knowing the body breathing, knowing sounds—clear knowing, continuous mindfulness. Staying very relaxed, but not casual.

As you're sitting with the awareness "there is a body," keeping that open frame in which you may be feeling sensations of the body breathing, hearing sounds—within that frame, there is a body. You may also be feeling other bodily sensations. Maybe they're strong sensations in particular places. Maybe they're simply background sensations.

You can include the awareness of these sensations in this field of openness. There's no need to zero your attention in on any particular sensation. Simply be aware that it is another arising experience within the frame of there being a body.

Sometimes these sensations come into the foreground of attention, and the breath or sounds may recede to the background. Sometimes the other bodily sensations remain in the background, even as you're noticing the body breathing in and out. Simply be with the flow of your experience however it unfolds, including the awareness of different bodily sensations as part of what may be arising within this larger frame.

If at times the mind feels inclined to narrow the attention just on the breath, or on a particular sensation, that is also fine to do. You can narrow the attention on that particular flow of sensation—the breath or other bodily sensations—and be with that for some time. Then again, open the field. You can really learn to be flexible with how you're using your attention.

Before we move on to some of the ways of applying this in the walking meditation, I'm interested if you have any questions about the instructions or your experience in the sitting we've just done.

Question from participant about the thought "there is a body"

That's a good thought to have. What is this body? It's going to be revealed as we do the walking. It will become clearer.

Another participant shares their experience

I just want to say, having meditated for many years and for long periods of time—and this was just a ten-minute sitting—my awareness was that when you kept saying "there is a body," I felt like, stop. Because I realized the discomfort I have in my own body. It's not necessarily a pain or an ache or anything like that. It's a discomfort of living, at that time, in my body. I just wanted to share that.

One of the things that's revealed in meditation are all the conscious and unconscious attitudes we bring to our experience. We're carrying a lot of conditioning about the body—how we feel about bodies in general, about our own bodies, about being in a body. It's a big, rich arena. And just by this simple exercise of settling into the recognition that there's a body, a lot of this starts to reveal itself.

The participant responds with humor about still finding old patterns

But just to say—even though you are seeing some of the same old conditioning come up, it's possible, and it's possible to do this quite quickly, that a shift in your attitude about the conditioning can take place. Instead of "Oh, here I am in the body again and I don't like it"—some variation of that—if that's seen clearly, that attitude itself can be recognized as just a passing thought, one you're not identified with. You're actually freeing yourself from being locked into that conditioning even as it's happening. You see it: "Oh yeah, there's that conditioning. That's all it is."

So there's a lot that will reveal itself.

I liked this one because I always had a problem understanding the very narrow instructions to follow your breath. I never really got anywhere with that. And as I was following this, thoughts would come up and I realized that you go where your thought goes. Like you actually feel like you're there. Your body has sensations based on whatever you're thinking. And then when you say, "there is a body," then you're back in your body. And it's like saying "be here now," and not be in some made-up fantasy land or past or future or something that isn't going to happen. And your body reacts as if it's happening.

Yes. Perfect.

Okay, before we start doing the walking meditation, I just want to do a little exercise which will provide perhaps some kind of framework for different ways of paying attention in walking. This is a very simple exercise and many of you may be familiar with it.

So if you just hold your hands together, very simply. And pretend for a moment that you've never meditated. You didn't know anything about this. And maybe you even think it's a little weird. And then I or somebody comes up to you—again, you've never meditated—and asks, what are you feeling? I think for the non-meditator, the most normal response would be, "I feel my hands," or "I feel my hands touching." Would you agree? That's kind of a normal response. But for meditators, it's a whole different story.

So what do you feel? What do some of you feel?

Burning in the index. Pulse. Harmonious energy. Tingling. Numbness. Pressure.

All kinds of sensations, right? When you're on the level of feeling sensations—of pressure, of tingling, of pulse, of all the things you described—and you're simply feeling those sensations, what has happened to the notion of hand? The notion of hand has disappeared, right? And what we're really feeling are just those changing sensations.

So this in itself, even though it seems very simple, is a very significant meditative move. Because the notion of hand is a concept. In other words, it's a concept that comes from a combination of what we see—the form of it—and the sensations that we're feeling. But we put it all together and create a sense of "oh, there's a hand," which is a mental construct. But when we're actually in the felt experience of what's going on, we see that hand disappears, and it's just these changing sensations.

Why is this of any interest? The reason this is a doorway to really deeper meditative insight is that when we're on the level of concept—hand—the concept doesn't change. I have a hand today, a hand yesterday, a hand tomorrow. And because the concept doesn't change, we live in the often unconscious assumption that the hand is something substantial in itself that's basically unchanging, or not changing very much. It is a hand. And yet when we're on the level of direct experience of the sensations, we see that the sensations are changing. They're changing moment to moment. We begin to see that on that level, there's

nothing substantial called hand. That's a concept that we've created.

And the concept suggests to us permanence. Whereas on the level of sensation and direct experience, we've dropped beneath the level of concept into what we're actually feeling. And that's when we're entering into the direct experience of this body, this whole body, as a flow of changing energy, changing sensation. Because the hand is just one representation of the experience of the whole body. Do you follow?

So instead of feeling this body is something solid and stable and basically unchanging—even though it changes, we know it changes over time and ages—but not on a moment-to-moment level. And so because we're not seeing that moment-to-moment change of the energy system of the body, it's much, much easier to become attached to it. This is the body. It's pretty solid. Not only that, it's *my* body. And so we create a whole sense of I and mine, because we haven't dropped to the level of just seeing our experience of the body being one of a flow of changing sensations.

So is this clear so far? This is very important, and this understanding can go very deep. The more we enter into the level beneath concepts, the more we explore the truth of the changing, ever-changing, rapidly changing nature—not only of the body, but of all experience. And so that really begins to change our relationship to our lives.

We'll be saying much more about this, but I just wanted to point out the significance of this very simple shift.

So in the walking, what I found—going back to the phrase "there is a body"—it's a little bit ironic in a way, because you would think using the phrase "there is a body" would lead you to the same understanding as "there is a hand." Because body itself is a concept. However, my experience has been, and also working with lots and lots of meditators, using that phrase "there is a body"—it's not meant as a kind of metaphysical statement, that there is a body, that there is a substantial body. That's not the point of the phrase. The point of the phrase is simply to settle into that larger framework in which we can experience the changing flow, the changing nature of the sensations, the flow of sensations of the breath or of different sounds.

So now we'll take some time for walking. You can find someplace in the building or outside—maybe take twenty minutes or so to do some walking exercise. Basically find someplace where you can walk back and forth, but it can be a longer distance. You don't have to necessarily be in just a short space; whatever is comfortable for you.

And I'd like you to notice these different levels of perception. So one level of perception is that yes, there are feet and legs and a body, and I'm walking. So just the normal, conventional perception of what we're doing. Just become aware of that. And see if you can even become aware that somewhere in the mind there is an image or a form of the foot or leg. It may not be very conscious, but it's there. We have some sense of, yeah, there's a foot, there's a leg—just like normal people would say "there is a hand." So be

normal people for a while.

But then switch, and go from normal to meditative. And here's where it gets interesting, using the phrase "there is a body" when walking. And this is—you can be walking at, you know, it doesn't have to be at a super slow speed, just even walking at a normal speed or slightly slower than normal. Drop the phrase in and use the phrase "there is a body" as you're walking. And pay attention to what you're experiencing as you use that phrase.

So it's very similar to what you did in the sitting. "There is a body." But then you use that as a frame—oh yeah, the body is breathing and feeling those sensations. There are other sensations happening, there are sounds. The same thing in the walking. "There is a body"—it's just creating the frame. So then you're walking and just be aware of what you're experiencing within that frame.

And what I think you may find, and this is where it's just interesting, even though we're using the phrase "there is a body" to get us there, we begin to experience, on the experience level, there actually isn't a body. All we're experiencing—the way I describe it—we're basically experiencing sensations in space. When we're on the level of actual sensations, not the form or the image of foot or leg.

So we're walking, "there is a body," just create the frame and then just see what you're experiencing. And you may experience that the body disappears. And the experience is just different sensations arising and passing in space, along with sounds, and anything else that may be arising. Again, if at times it feels like your mind wants to narrow the attention, that's fine to do.

You could drop into just the sensations of the foot or leg moving, where you're not holding the bigger frame, or just as if you were feeling the arm moving, really very carefully feeling the sensations of movement. So it's very possible and fine to sometimes narrow the focus, but I'd like you to experiment somewhat with keeping the larger frame in which you're simply allowing whatever sensations to be there.

Does this seem clear? Are there any questions about this instruction for the walking?

This particular use of the phrase "there is a body" in walking meditation really transformed my practice, because for thirty-five years I had been narrowly focusing, which brought its own benefit—it brought it to a great depth. But this opened up a whole different way of understanding.

Be mindful there is a body to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness.

I'd like to make a few comments about that walking practice and then have another short sitting, and then we'll open it for some questions about your experience.

One of the things I noticed when I was doing some of the walking practice myself—something I didn't mention—was that because there were quite a lot of people walking and having to navigate among so

many people, one aspect of experience that we usually don't bring attention to very mindfully is that of seeing.

Usually we just buy into the conventional reality of what's being seen. We're living in the world of what's being seen, and our minds can get caught up in a lot of judgments and comments about what's being seen. But actually, in this walking practice and in general, it is possible to be doing that walking and simply including seeing as part of what's arising in the bigger frame. It's not like we're walking, there is a body, we're feeling the points of sensation of the body as moving, and then what's being seen is something different from that. The seeing itself can become simply part of what we're aware of.

I had a very striking example of the importance of this. For most of us who enjoy reasonably good sight, seeing is probably the predominant sense field that we live in, and probably the one we notice mindfully the least. Sounds have a strong impact, so we usually become aware when we're hearing a strong sound. We certainly are more aware of the body. But it's like we're swimming in the world of what's being seen without really being mindful that we're seeing. We're just living in the whole world of concepts that we create about what's being seen.

One example of this happened to me on retreat, illustrating the importance of bringing mindfulness to seeing. I was on retreat at IMS, the Insight Meditation Society, with a lot of meditators—ninety-five, a hundred meditators. I noticed that every time I went into the dining room for meals, my mind would have a comment about almost everybody. It was ridiculous. I liked what they were wearing. I didn't like what they were wearing. They were moving too quickly. They were moving too slowly. They took too much food. They didn't take enough food. It was just this endless litany of comment.

After a while, when I finally noticed that, I said, "This is ridiculous." Then I began to see: why? Why are there all these commenting and judging thoughts in the mind? And I realized that they were all coming because I was not being mindful of seeing.

So what I started to do on that retreat—and since then, whenever I go on retreat into the dining room or where there are a lot of people around—for some time as a practice exercise, all I will do is note "seeing." That's all I'm paying attention to, that sense field. I'll go through the whole lunch line, getting the food, sitting at the table: seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing, reminding myself, "Yes, I'm seeing."

It was amazing. About ninety-eight percent of all the comments and judgments were eliminated, because I was being mindful of what I was seeing instead of having the mind jump out through the eye door, land on what was being seen, and then create all kinds of judgments and comments. Do you follow this? It was so simple and so freeing of a pattern that had been quite well established, all that commenting and judging mind. And it was all simply because I was not mindful that I was seeing.

I would suggest—not only in the context of a mini retreat like this, but out in the world—to really bring that aspect of mindfulness to your life. As I say, we live mostly in the world of what's being seen. That is

the predominant field for most of us. And yet we are totally caught, unmindfully, in that world, creating whole worlds of concepts about what's being seen and then living in that, living in that reactivity. This is not to say that we don't respond to what's being seen, but we can be doing it mindfully.

So when I was in India—this goes back many years, when I was first practicing there in Bodhgaya—in the town there was a working elephant. And sometimes I'd be walking into the village and the elephant would be coming the other way. I didn't simply say, "Seeing, seeing, seeing." I stepped out of the way. It's a big contest between an elephant and Joseph.

So it doesn't mean that we don't respond to what's being seen. But we're doing it with awareness, we're doing it with mindfulness, with wisdom, with discernment. We're responding appropriately rather than having this endless litany of judgments and comments and reactions and all of that mental activity that goes on a good part of the time because we're not mindful of what we're seeing.

So that was one piece that I noticed could well be brought into this walking exercise here. We'll just include that.

The other comment I wanted to make about the walking was that in terms of the particular suggestion I was making—in terms of "there is a body," using that as the frame and seeing what your experience is—I realized there were certain constraints because of where we are now. But keep in mind that you can do that at any time, at any speed. You're just living your life. You're walking down the street. You don't have to be in any particular meditative stylistic form. You're just walking. But if you remember, if you're mindful, you're just walking. Oh, there's a body. Even in that very normal way of activity, just that settling back into that frame will reveal that all that you're really experiencing are these different sensations in space, and perhaps sights and sounds. And the solidity, the sense of the solidity of the body and "this body is me"—that really begins to fall away. But I wanted to emphasize that this can be done in very normal circumstances. You don't have to be walking slowly or in any special way. It's just remembering.

So the first really important meditative shift is what I described earlier: when we go from the concept of things, like "hand," to the actual felt sensations. Because on that level we're experiencing, in many ways, the first direct, immediate, vivid experience of the impermanence of it all. The sensations are changing all the time. It's like a current, a river of changing sensations, which we call "hand." But we want to drop into that direct perception of impermanence.

The next big meditative understanding, which I mentioned last night, has tremendous implications in our lives. It's one of the very key elements: the very deeply conditioned habit we have of liking what's pleasant and not liking what's unpleasant. You can substitute liking and not liking with clinging to and avoiding, grasping and aversion. We're going for the pleasant, we're trying to avoid or keep away the unpleasant. And this is normal. This is the normal way we're living our lives.

So it's not that if you notice yourself doing this, there should be all this self-judgment. "Oh, there I go,

hating the unpleasant again"—which is just more hating the unpleasant. No, this is our normal conditioning, so this is quite natural. However, it's problematic because we cannot control the flow. We can influence it to some extent, and we do try to influence it, but we can't really control the arising of pleasant and unpleasant things. Can you say, as you're sitting in your life, "Let me only experience pleasant sensations. Let me only experience pleasant emotions, pleasant thoughts"? No. Things are coming out of causes and conditions which are very complex, multifaceted, and our life is made up of pleasant experiences and unpleasant experiences. That's true for everyone.

The reason for giving emphasis to this is that if we're attached, really holding on in some kind of unhealthy way, some obsessive way, attached to the pleasant, then we're going to suffer when it inevitably changes. And it will. If we're attached to youth, we're not going to feel so great as we get older. Or even—and this is maybe a little counterintuitive—but if we're attached in an unhealthy way to health, then how is our mind going to be when the body is not healthy? And that's going to happen at one point or another.

So the attachment to the pleasant, as I said last night about some other things, does not enhance the pleasure. In fact, it detracts from it. I'm not suggesting we should pull away from the pleasant. Pleasant is nice. Pleasant is pleasant. But it is impermanent. It's not going to last.

Our conditioning leads us to want the pleasant and reject the unpleasant. This is the cause of stress in our lives, the suffering in our lives. Or we try to build a defensive wall against everything unpleasant, thinking we'll live in a certain way and keep everything difficult away. It just doesn't work. And that very act of living in that way creates its own tension. We're not living freely.

Meditation is a way of understanding this fundamental principle of life—that our life consists of pleasant and unpleasant in all the realms. Pleasant and unpleasant physical sensations, pleasant and unpleasant sounds, thoughts, emotions, tastes, everything. That's why this particular matrix of pleasant and unpleasant is so critical, because it's pervasive and touches every single aspect of our experience. It's either pleasant or unpleasant, and sometimes it's called neutral if it's neither.

In our practice, what we need to do is slowly decondition our more normal response of pleasant leading to "I like, I want," and unpleasant leading to "push away, I don't like, let's get rid of." That's our normal response. Meditation is a way of deconditioning that.

So when pleasant comes—whatever it is, pleasant bodily sensation, pleasant thoughts, pleasant fantasies—we acknowledge it, we're being mindful, we can even be noting, "Oh pleasant, this is pleasant." We feel it. We're not pushing it away, we're feeling the pleasantness, but without attachment, without grasping, knowing that it is a changing feeling. Pleasant—it's nice when it's there, and it's going to go.

When unpleasant feeling comes, instead of that moment of panic about pain of whatever sort, we decondition that response. It's like I was saying with fear. It's okay. It's okay to feel unpleasant. It's okay to

feel the unpleasantness of physical pain. So instead of aversion or fear or pulling back from it, we coach ourselves. We need to coach ourselves because our conditioning is the opposite. We remind ourselves, "Okay, there's a painful feeling here. It's okay. Just let me feel it. Let me relax into it."

And we see that the ability to relax into it itself eases the mind tremendously, because we're not in that tight, contracted, reactive state. It's okay. The unpleasant doesn't become pleasant all of a sudden—it may still be painful. And it's okay to feel it.

This is a huge reordering of our inner life, our inner conditioning. It has tremendous implications for how freely we live our lives as conditions keep changing for us. Whatever the conditions of our bodies, our relationships, our emotions, our work, the politics in the world—this pleasant and unpleasant is happening on every single level. How we relate to that will determine our own level of peace and happiness and ease.

There is a way of practicing this very specifically in meditation. We settle in—there is a body, feeling the breath. For the most part, for most people, although not always, feeling the body breathing is pretty neutral. It's not particularly pleasant, not unpleasant. So that's a neutral experience. But as you're sitting in that very open space, aware of the body breathing, aware of sounds, you may well become aware of different other bodily sensations. I would suggest that you particularly notice as these other sensations arise whether you're experiencing them as pleasant or unpleasant or possibly neutral. It doesn't have to be intense, although maybe there will be some intense sensation. Maybe it's subtle—perhaps a feeling of tension or tightness or pressure. They may have even a slight flavor. You're feeling it as being unpleasant.

So notice that. Oh, unpleasant, unpleasant. And then notice your response to that. Are you relaxed in that awareness? Are you just settled back, acknowledging, oh, unpleasant, unpleasant, but the mind is even, not reactive? Or are you noticing unpleasant, painful, I don't like? See if that's the reaction. And then notice what the effect in the body and in the mind is of "I don't like." Really notice what happens from that.

And the same thing if you're experiencing some pleasant sensation. Maybe there's a nice light vibration, or a softness, or a tingling. A lot of pleasant sensations can arise. If you become aware and notice that, make a note: oh, this is pleasant, pleasant. And can you be in that same openness of just feeling it, being with it, but without wanting it to continue? I've noticed this so many times in my practice—when I've had some really nice pleasant sensation, then in the back or front of my mind: okay, how can I keep this going? That's just a kind of greed or grasping. And they always go anyway.

There's more to say about this, which I'll talk about this afternoon, which actually leads to even more profound understandings. But for now, let's focus on just the awareness of what's pleasant, what's unpleasant, making a note to highlight it, and then noticing whatever reaction or non-reaction there is in the mind about it.

Does the instruction seem clear? Okay, so we'll sit for about fifteen minutes. I'll probably speak a little less during this sitting since you are now all experienced meditators.

There's some time now if you have any questions about anything you experienced this morning or the instructions.

Question: I have a question about the notion of the reality of the hand versus the reality of the sensations in the hand. I feel, why not turn it exactly the other way around and say the hand is undeniably real while the sensations are transitory? And then I think, well, why is there a hierarchy at all? Isn't that also imposing an abstract notion on all of it? Where do you go with that?

Well, I think that within the question, you opened the doorway to the answer. I'm going to just drop down to the quintessential statement of the Buddha in terms of what he taught. Underneath all of the philosophy and the descriptions and everything, he said he really just teaches one thing: he teaches suffering and the end of suffering. That's the point of it all.

So then the question is, well, what is the cause of suffering in our lives? If we want to come to the end of it, we need to understand the cause, and of course this is the classical formulation of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its cause, its end, and the way to the end.

One particular way of understanding the cause of suffering in our lives is that when we are attached or hold on to that which in its very nature will change, we suffer. I mean, it's obvious if we're holding on—you know, if you're holding on to a rope and the rope is being pulled through your hand, the more tightly you hold on, the more rope burn you get, right? So one aspect of the practice is just to see on all levels that things are in constant change.

Even the hand as a concept—we may not be seeing a change moment to moment as we are in seeing the sensations, but certainly over years we can see the change in the hand. And certainly when the body dies, it's going to change. So the point of the meditation, in many different ways—and there are many different techniques and methods for doing it—is to keep drawing the mind down to the insight into impermanence on deeper and deeper levels, because it's that insight that deconditions grasping. And the less grasping, the less suffering. So that's the trajectory of it all and the point of it all, rather than some philosophical postulation.

It's a practical thought then. Thank you.

Question: Joseph, over time I'm reading a book called On Tyranny, 20 Lessons for Difficult Times. The author talks about making eye contact. What happens to me more and more is I say bonjour to someone or hello, and they answer me and they don't look at me. You talked about seeing. Could you comment on that, please?

Well, it somewhat depends—some combination of different conditions—of why people might not be

making eye contact.

And there's a whole range of possibilities, so it would be very hard to say specifically what's happening in any one situation.

Just a few examples. When people are in retreat, very often we suggest avoiding eye contact just to help people stay within their inner frame of reference—although now we're including more awareness of seeing, but not so much eye contact with people. But that's for a very specific purpose.

Out in the world, people might be avoiding eye contact for many reasons. Maybe they're just lost in their own world, their own particular mind drama that's going on at the time. Maybe there's fear—some people simply don't want to connect; there's a certain fearfulness of connecting. Maybe somebody's just in a grumpy mood and they don't want eye contact.

But I think from your perspective, or our perspective, if the motive is one of goodwill, it's worth continuing to exude that goodwill. People respond how they respond.

There's one monk, a Sri Lankan monk named Bhante Gunaratana—those of you who know him, he's now in his eighties, a wonderful monk. He goes on a five-mile walk every day, wherever he is, walking along the road. And he's in monk's robes. And every car that passes, he waves. It's so wonderful. Sometimes he's in Barre, which is this small, rural town, and he's walking along the road. I'm partly projecting with my own imagination, but sometimes you can get a sense of the responses. A lot of people just wave back. And a lot of people are looking at him like he's a little odd. There are all kinds of responses to it. But he goes on waving.

Question from the audience about using labels in the practice of mindfulness of seeing.

I think labels can be very helpful, but particularly labeling "seeing" rather than what's being seen. The label itself is not what's important—what's important is being mindful. So the label is just like a coach or a reminder: "Oh yes, this is seeing."

I found it really helpful in the situation I described earlier, because it was so easy, and the mind was so conditioned, to again be pulled out into what was being seen—landing out there and then having all kinds of judgments. So the labeling, the noting, really helped me stay back. And the seeing became receptive rather than the mind going out. It was just receiving the sight.

There's a whole story—maybe I'll try to abbreviate it—that illustrates the power of playing with this.

Many of you are probably familiar with the artist Kandinsky, who was supposedly the first artist to really paint in a purely abstract way. There's a story of his going to an exhibition of Monet in St. Petersburg—the series of paintings called Monet's Haystacks, where Monet painted haystacks at different times of day and through different times of the year.

Kandinsky, in seeing this exhibition, had a transformative revelation. As he was looking so intently at the haystacks, he began to see that what was really there was just color and form and brushstrokes. There was no haystack—nothing that we would ascribe conventional reality to. It was all just made up of colors and forms.

There's an article describing this. It's as if he fell into a whole new universe of color and form and light and shadow, free of concepts. And of course, that then informed his painting and the whole movement in art—this new way of seeing. It came about from seeing rather than getting caught in the conceptual overlay of what's being seen.

So I think it's a powerful practice. But again, when the elephant is walking toward you, you don't want to just see color and form.

It's something that I have more fun and appreciate more and more. And when I'm alone at home, things are going great.

One practitioner shared: "I'm saying meditation is highly appreciated, and I find it great when I'm alone at home or here with people meditating. My challenge comes in staying an observer or staying mindful in relationship. Particularly I appreciate the comment from the person who spoke before me—when my three children come at me and start talking, my partner and everything, being the observer and talking at the same time... the mind becomes really overwhelmed and just cannot stay mindful because there's too much coming in. So it's a question of how to stay present in speed, how to be present when the external source becomes overwhelming. Whatever experience is going on internally is not so bad. But when it's coming from the outside, I'm still wondering: what do I do with that? It's challenging."

When I was a kid, really young, I lived up in the country with very few people. Sometimes we'd visit relatives in the city, and near where they lived there was a busy road. For some reason—maybe all kids like to do this—I just liked to stand by the side of the road watching the cars go by. There weren't that many cars where I lived, so this was my great entertainment.

But I learned something, even as a kid. There are two ways of watching speeding cars go by. At first, what I was doing gave me a headache—trying to track each one. Another way was just keeping really perfectly still and letting the cars cross my field of vision. I could stay still and the cars were going by just as fast, but I didn't have to do anything to be aware of them all. They were doing the work.

There is some analogy here. Even when a lot's going on, the tendency is to try covering all the bases, taking care of everything at once. It would be an interesting experiment—and it would take practice and exploring—to see what it would be like to find that center space and then deal with each thing that comes up as it's coming up, rather than looking ahead or looking behind and trying to cover it all at once. Because that's when the mind can really get agitated and feel overwhelmed. But moment to moment—oh, screaming... making a mess... whatever the various activities are.

And in all that, essential in that situation and in all of our life's situations, is to really be monitoring and attending to your own inner response and reactivity as things are going on. If you're noticing that the mind, the heart is getting wound up in some way, then it might be time to consciously impose a pause—"Okay kids, one minute break"—or whatever, however you can figure out how to do that. Just realize: I need a few breaths here. Because otherwise we get caught up in the momentum of our reactivity, and it starts to spiral out of control.

For me, one of the joys of meditation is to see it not only as a particular technique—of which there are many—but more to appreciate the creative aspect of it. There's a situation in my mind, in my experience. What's the cause of the suffering or the stress here? Where's the place to unhook from that? We bring an investigative mind to our particular situation, and that's what makes it interesting. We find our own ways. Once we know the principle—okay, I need to unhook from this reactivity—we can explore.

One of my meditative mantras is: whatever works. When we're caught up in something or other, it's like, okay, whatever works.

Another practitioner offered: "I wanted to begin by expressing my appreciation for the very deep and profound simplicity with which you are sharing these teachings. I'm circling around something that I'm not really clear about, so I'm hoping that your discernment will get to the heart of it. I was very struck last night when you talked about the almost aesthetic quality of sadness and that poignancy. And that's related to what I'm circling around. I'm wondering about how passion connects with what you're talking about—and eros, I don't mean just sexually, but the deep intensity with which we can live in life—and how that connects with the non-attachment that you're talking about."

Perfect.

I was hoping somebody would ask that question. Thank you. And the answer really may not answer your question, but it's a chance for me to say something I've been wanting to share. I learned this approach from my teacher, Munindraji. People would ask him all kinds of questions, and then he'd answer whatever he wanted to answer. It was a great teaching tool.

I was talking to Pascal yesterday, and we may do this as a joint book. It's basically a two-paragraph book—maybe even one paragraph. And the title of the book is *The Myth of Intimacy*. You could substitute "passion" for that, or whatever word you like. So what is this two-paragraph book on the myth of intimacy?

It's basically one sentence. Our common conventional understanding is that intimacy requires two. And so much of our lives we're searching for that person we can be intimate with. One of the great discoveries in meditation is that the quality of intimacy is not dependent on anybody else or any particular experience. The quality of intimacy has to do with the quality of our attention. We can become intimate—even to that sense of becoming one with, which would be the height of intimacy—in any moment of experience when

we are fully attentive to whatever's arising.

Very often, and this is a common experience in meditation, once people deepen their practice to some extent, the reason they find it so rewarding is that the experience sitting on your cushion or walking becomes exceedingly intimate. It's like there is no separation of oneself from the experience. There's a oneness with the experience. And I have found that this understanding of intimacy really carries over to relationships with other people—taking it out of all our concepts of what an intimate relationship is, but reframing it more as: what's the quality of attention in any interaction?

One of the things I really love about teaching on retreats, or even in this situation responding to questions, is that it's a very intimate space. If there's a genuine kind of openness to what's being expressed and experienced, something quite profound happens. I often call the meditation interviews "ten-minute marriages" because they're very intimate. I kind of recommend the ten-minute marriage.

"So if I may, I'd just like to notice—I noticed that rather than speak about passion, you spoke about intimacy, and I get it."

Yes, good.

"For me, my question was more coming back to the walking meditation. I noticed that I had a really strong wanting to close my eyes all the time. I've noticed I've been meditating always with eyes closed while sitting, and I've also noticed in my yoga practice I have a tendency to close my eyes all the time. It feels like I can connect more with the sensations of the body that way. But then as I was walking, it's not as functional to close your eyes. And I was seeing the periphery of my body, so I had a hard time experiencing it as body sensation because I could see the form of my body. That's why I had the tendency of closing my eyes. So I'm asking myself: is the sitting meditation and the yoga practice now creating a problem because now I'm walking?"

Well, it could be creating an artificial limitation—not that there's anything wrong with that. I've mostly sat with my eyes closed as well, although in walking I generally keep my eyes open. But the depth of practice and what you can understand is not dependent on your eyes being closed. Keeping them closed does cut out certain fields of perception so that you can perhaps experience more vividly the subtle sensations in the body. There is something that happens from that.

But I have done practices where one sits with eyes open, and practices with eyes closed. At first sitting with eyes open felt a little less deep, less vivid. But after just some practice with it, I realized that it's the same. You can come to the same level of stillness, of openness, of connectedness. So you might just experiment. Take a week or two where you're doing your same practice, whatever practice you're doing, but just do it with your eyes slightly open and see what that's like. I think you'll find after a while that it really doesn't make any difference. And it does open the possibility of being equally aware in more

normal circumstances when our eyes need to be open—not losing ourselves in what's being seen, because we've practiced being aware of that sense field.

"My question has to do with the presentation you gave yesterday on how life's experiences—grief, sadness, death, sickness—you advised equanimity as opposed to indifference. I was comparing that to other traditions such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which says, and I'm paraphrasing, that there are some things you can change, some things you can't, and you need to distinguish between the two and accept what you cannot change. The tension I'm seeing with what you presented is that there are some things within your sphere of influence. So are you suggesting not trying to change them?"

No, not at all.

I think there's no difference, actually, in the teachings. And I think I've mentioned, but perhaps passed over it quite quickly, that equanimity is just that place of clear seeing, impartiality—"Oh, this is how it is."

From that basis of clear seeing, then exactly what you're saying, there can be the discernment: first, is this skillful or is it unskillful? Is this causing suffering or not causing suffering? So we can make that assessment. Then there's a further assessment: is this something I can change or influence, or not?

If it is something we can change, that's when the whole movement of compassionate response comes. Compassion for oneself, compassion for others—that's what motivates us to change. If it's something that we see is unskillful, maybe out in the world, and cannot be changed, we still see that clearly, and we can still feel the compassion, but have the equanimity of realizing this is beyond my control. So it feels to me like it's the same teaching.

Now, you're going to be faced with one incredibly difficult challenge, and that is to stay even remotely mindful during the lunch break. I think it would be particularly helpful to work with this larger frame we've been talking about: there is a body. Just having that in the background, because that can be held in any activity, at any speed. You don't have to be super slow and meticulous in what you're doing, which is appropriate in some meditative situations. But in this kind of situation, where you'll probably be out and about, maybe going for a walk and eating, just see if you can hold or come back to: "Oh, there is a body." And then simply being aware of whatever your experience is within that.

This includes everything—all the sensations that you may feel, the sights, the sounds, the tastes. Remember the instruction from the Sutta that the Buddha gave. It's very simple and very direct: be mindful "there is a body."

We're just using that phrase, just to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness. There's nothing we have to struggle with, we don't have to be super effortful. It's just enough—"there is a body"—just enough for clear knowing of what's arising, and as much continuity in that as possible. And

when we forget, we come back.

Have a nice lunch.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.