Questions and Answers

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:09:52

Nice to be with you all.

So there's a certain ground rule for this evening: just easy questions. I'm out of practice.

The question is about intention and the three levels and all types of intention—how do they work together?

I haven't really used that particular framework very much, but as I understand at least part of the question, I think one of the problems or the challenges is that the word intention in English can refer to different things. We use the same word for quite different meanings.

For example, the intention on a moment-to-moment level—like intention to move or intention to stand or intention to walk—that's almost like an energetic impulse to initiate an action. You can feel it kind of about to do something and then the doing of it. It's like a spark plug or something; it initiates the action.

But we also use the word intention in a more overarching way. We could think of it either as the motivation to do something or the goal. We have an intention to accomplish something. So it's intention as a goal or intention as a motivation. These are quite different things, and I think we just want to be aware of each of them as they arise.

One of the interesting things about intention as the energetic impulse is something I found to be very interesting in my own practice. In walking meditation, or just walking about, intention has to be continually arising. Because if you're taking a step and the intention stops in the middle of the step, the movement will stop. The intention is what's keeping the movement going.

The example is given—this wasn't from the Buddhist time—but it's like plugging an electric appliance into an outlet. If you take the plug out, whatever the appliance is stops working. It needs the constant flow of electricity. In the same way, there needs to be a constant flow of intention to keep an activity going.

One time I was on self-retreat, and I was doing walking practice—not the super slow walking, I was just stepping, stepping, stepping. I became interested in noticing the ongoing flow of intention, realizing that that's what was needed to keep the movement happening.

As I focused in on that quality of the flow of intention, first I began to feel the expression of it in a particular place in my body, even though it's a mental factor. Many mental qualities find expression in some kind of bodily sensation. I began to notice some aspect of the intention sort of in the area of the

heart, and it almost felt like a little intention motor, which just kept me walking.

First, just that investigation was interesting, but what really became illuminating in that little experiment was realizing how easy it is to unknowingly or unconsciously be identified with intention. The sense of self is easily created when we're identified with this flow of intentions that keeps activity going on, and that gives rise to the sense, "Well, I'm walking," or "I'm doing this," or "I'm doing that."

As I became mindful of that intention motor, it really highlighted the impersonal, non-self nature of intention. It felt like that was just one little piece of disentangling the sense of self in the midst of our ordinary activities—to see the impersonality of it. That was interesting, and you might want to just experiment with that.

As you know, the Buddha gave a lot of importance to the recognition and the understanding of intention. So that's on this moment-to-moment level—what's like the electric current that keeps everything going.

Of course, it must be obvious to you by now that intention in the meaning of motivation or aspiration—the intention in doing something, the motivation in doing something—it's hugely important to be aware of that and to see whether the motivation is wholesome or unwholesome. Because there are a lot of consequences depending on which it is.

That takes a lot of sensitivity. And it takes a lot of honesty. Maybe you don't fall into this category, but I think very often, or it's not uncommon, to think that our motivations are basically good, and we assume that. They're probably mostly good, but they're probably not always good.

And so it takes a real willingness and honesty just to really take a look at, okay, well, what is the motivation? As you're going through the food line, for example. How much does one take, and is it for just the health of the body, or does some desire and greed come up in the mind with certain foods?

A very good place to observe this—and I'm jumping ahead about a week now because it's not so much while you're on retreat but when you'll be coming out of retreat—an amazingly fruitful place to watch this kind of intention as motivation is in speech. Huge. If we could really be aware of our motive before we speak, we'd probably speak a lot less.

So these are some of the thoughts I have.

Question: My question relates to the progress of insight. I'm interested in how you hold that and whether you found it to be a useful description of how insight unfolds and happens.

Yes, so the question was about the map of progress, the progress of insight and the various stages of insight that one goes through, and whether I feel that this is a useful map, whether it's good for meditators to know about this.

In my experience—in fact we were just talking about it at lunch today—it seems that for some meditators,

whether they know about it or not, as they're practicing and coming in to describe their practice, they'll describe it pretty classically. They'll just be describing the different stages of insight as the practice deepens. Other people, it's not how they describe their practice, but there can still be the same sense of deepening.

My experience has been that some fall into that classical progressive insight unfolding, while others will be describing their practice and the deepening of it more in terms of just increasing levels of letting go of clinging. And so that's how it'll be described as they come into practice. One can both see it in oneself, and a teacher can really observe how people are just letting go and letting go and letting go. Over all these years of teaching, I've really seen basically those two main streams of how people describe their practice. So I think it's helpful to understand that it is a map, but it's not the only map.

I think it's mostly not useful to know beforehand. Just as an example, I had the misfortune of having read all about it before I started my practice. And even within the first few weeks or months of my practice in India, I was thinking, "Oh yeah, I'm here, oh yeah, now I'm at this stage and this stage and this stage"—because I wasn't at any of the stages. Those concepts were so in my mind and I was so locked into that map that I was really misinterpreting a lot of my experience. It can set up a lot of expectation.

Of course, if one already does know the map, you can't really unknow it. But I would be watchful of how much interpreting of one's experience happens in terms of that as you're going along. During my practice, I had one particular mental note: "practice assessment tape." I would just see my mind judging, assessing my own practice. I'd have lots of judgments, both good and bad, assessing the practice. When we're caught in that, we're not really practicing. We're just caught up in our interpretation of what's happening. And it was not helpful.

Also, sometimes even for experienced teachers and people who are immersed in that system, it's often difficult to tell which stage one is at because certain qualities overlap. For example, there are certain qualities at the stage of things arising and passing away with very strong mindfulness and equanimity—it's really a good time in practice, very powerful. But some of those same qualities are also found in the later stages of equanimity, and it's easy to misinterpret.

One of the things Sayadaw U Pandita would say is that if one does know the map and is trying to assess, or for a teacher trying to get a sense of where somebody's at, and there's some doubt about whether it's a higher or lower stage—always assume it's the lower. I think that was good advice.

I think that map is most useful in retrospect, after one has really been immersed in practice for however long—six weeks or three months or five years—and then looking back at various experiences. In looking back, it might give you a sense of where one is in the practice. But it's delicate. I've seen a lot of people get really tied up in knots about what stage and this and that.

Question about doubt, particularly the form of wavering, and when it gets mingled up with worry and comes

to decision making. There's a way in which choices can present themselves as this kind of moral dilemma—wanting to do the right thing, make the right choice. And even on retreat, all throughout the day there are many little choices that have to be made. Sometimes the mind can kind of blow them up and turn them into these big dramatic moral dilemmas.

So the question is about doubt and being caught in indecision when certain choices come up, sometimes in the context of a moral dilemma of trying to suss out which is the wholesome or which is the unwholesome, and how the mind can get really obsessed about that.

So there are a couple of things with regard to this.

One, if there's the doubt of just the mind feeling confused—"What is going on?"—and there's just not a lot of clarity, or there's doubt like "Am I doing the practice right?"—that kind of doubt is actually very simple to remedy. Because just now, if you feel your hands touching one another, is there any doubt in the mind about the awareness of that sensation? No. Just the awareness of a breath. If we're simply feeling an in-breath or a rising movement and the mind is totally with the moment's experience, there's no doubt. It's very clear.

The doubt starts coming when we lose contact with the moment's experience and the mind spins out in thinking. So when that's happening, if you can recognize it and then just come back to the simplicity of touching, breathing—just coming back right to the simplicity of the moment's experience—the doubt is no longer there. That's relatively simple, although sometimes it's hard to remember to do that because doubt is so seductive.

I don't know whether in the dharma talks anybody mentioned that the reason doubt is so seductive is because it comes masquerading as wisdom. The tone of voice in the mind of the doubting mind sounds very wise: "Well, what should I be doing? Should I be doing this? Should I be doing that? Which is better?" Whatever form our own doubts take. So we have to really pay attention to not being seduced by the masquerade of wisdom and to see doubt as doubt. Because as soon as you recognize that that's what it is, then it's easy to apply the remedy of just coming back to the moment. That's the doubt of confusion. When there's connection to the moment, the mind is really not confused.

When it's the doubt of not knowing—two choices, "Should I do this? Should I do that?"—this comes up not only in practice, but maybe even more in life. A life situation where there's a choice and it's just not clear which is the right thing to do.

I had a mini satori around that issue. I was confronting a situation like that, where there was a juncture in my life with two choices, and I just didn't know. At a certain point, I was driving myself crazy trying to decide. It was a moment of revelation when I realized that it's okay not to know. Sometimes we don't know until we know. We're faced with a choice and we don't know—and we can get okay with not knowing. That became a little mantra for me: "It's okay not to know."

And it's something you might look at. Maybe this does not apply to all of you, but I found that until that moment—and then in looking back—I realized how uncomfortable the feeling of not knowing was. It was that discomfort which kept driving me to think, "I have to make a decision because it's too uncomfortable not to know." So it was a great relief to just settle into "It's okay not to know." At a certain point, the decision will be made either because you get some clarity about it or the time passes for having made the decision. The decision will be made in that way.

There was a student of Krishnamurti—do you know who Krishnamurti was? A great Indian teacher. He had a student, a woman named Vimala Thakar. Krishnamurti wanted her to begin teaching, and she was very reluctant. She didn't want to. He kept urging her, and she wouldn't do it. Finally, he said to her, "The reason you don't want to start teaching is you're afraid to make mistakes. Don't be afraid to make mistakes."

I think that could be playing into what you described—here on retreat, during the course of the day, there are lots of little choice points. So instead of being caught up in the doubting mind and obsessing about which is right, I think if a decision has to be made in the moment, you take your best guess at what's wholesome. And then you pay attention. You'll see, "Oh, that was a good decision."

Or that wasn't, you know, and you really learn something from that. So I think the important thing is simply to free the mind from being caught in the wavering of perplexity—either in the sense of recognizing that it's okay not to know, or just making a choice and then paying attention to what the effect is. We learn from our mistakes if it was a mistake. Or really bringing the mind back at that point very precisely to the moment's experience and seeing if the clarity of that actually allows for a clear understanding to emerge.

This is really important. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to recognize doubt as a hindrance. Because of all the hindrances, it is said—and I've experienced this and observed it in others—doubt is the most dangerous in terms of the practice. With all the others, whether it's desire or aversion or sleepiness, restlessness even, the mind is kind of in the ballpark of the experience. It's not relating to it in a skillful way, but it's there with what's happening, maybe with greed or aversion. But with doubt, we're not even in the ballpark. The mind is just caught up in some mental proliferation. And it's very seductive.

So we really need to learn to recognize it and to name it: "This is the doubting mind." And then approach it either in some of the ways I mentioned, or maybe you'll be creative and find some other ways. But it's really important to see it, to name it, to disidentify with the doubt. Because as long as we're caught in that, we don't go anyplace.

There was one yogi on a three-month retreat many years ago—I don't know, maybe thirty years ago—who spent three months asking, "Should I do metta or vipassana?" Every interview. And I'd say, "Just choose one, it doesn't really matter. They're both great." Then he would do one for a day, and then again the doubt would arise. It was a classic example of the dangers of doubt, because he couldn't land. So it's really

important to keep an eye out for it and to be able to recognize it.

Someone asked about wanting and not wanting—whether it's a certain feeling of lack that drives the wanting, and what one can do about that. This question goes to the heart of what the Buddha taught. The Four Noble Truths are all in that question, and it's of great interest to me.

Sometimes the feeling of lack is obvious, and we can see how that is driving a wanting or a craving. Sometimes it's simply the seduction of some pleasure. We may be feeling totally fine, and then a thought arises. This is something I've often noticed on retreat. I can be practicing, sitting or walking, and then the thought will come, "Oh, a cup of tea. That would be nice." I really wasn't feeling a lack, but the thought came, and then there was a certain seduction—that'll be pleasant. And then I'd be mindful and the desire would go away. And then about three and a half seconds later, the thought would come up again: "Oh, cup of tea." And I'd note it, and it would go away.

This could go on for quite a while. It's very humbling by the eleventh or twelfth time when it comes up and then you watch yourself going for the cup of tea. The power of the desire, the power of the craving, is strong. Sometimes the image that comes to mind is like a blade of grass that will come up through concrete. It's very small, but it has a deep driving force to it.

So desire or craving is like that.

One of the things in my practice—and this is something I've been exploring recently, just in the last few years really—is understanding craving not as limited to these pleasant ideas of experiences that we'll enjoy. The Buddha talked about three kinds of craving: craving for sense pleasures, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming.

I began to see in my meditation—and I'm sure you've had this experience because it's so common—that we can be doing the practice, we're in this moment, we're in the moment, but we're with this *in order for* this. It's like we're leaning into the process. We're with the in-breath in order to feel the out-breath, or we're with the breath in order to feel more calm, or in order to concentrate. I call it the "in-order-to mind." And it's a kind of leaning into the next moment.

I had been noticing this for years in my practice—how there's a wanting or craving for this to become that. We're with the pain in order for it to ease, or we're with a good feeling in order for it to continue. All of that I'm calling craving for becoming.

Just in the last few years, two teachings from the suttas came to mind as I was sitting, and they had a really profound effect on that deeply conditioned kind of craving, of wanting, of desiring.

The first was a discourse where the Buddha used some images to describe the five aggregates. He used the image of the body, the physical elements, as a heap of foam—like foam on water. All the sensations in the body he described as just a heap of foam. Feelings, vedanā, he described as bubbles in a stream.

Perception is a mirage. All the mental formations are like a plantain or banana tree whose trunk has no core—there's no pith to the trunk of a banana tree, it's just layers with nothing at the center. And consciousness is a magic show.

I started taking just the very first image: the body as a lump or heap of foam. I'd be sitting and just feeling the body, not necessarily having the mind go to particular sensations, but just the sense of the whole body sitting. You feel those energy sensations of the body, and I would bring in that image. I would let that image settle. Oh, this really is like just a lump or a heap of foam.

And the great realization in that was that it will never be anything else but a heap of foam. So there is nothing to become. There's nothing to want because there will never be anything other than what it is now, in terms of it being just a lump of foam. And in that moment, I could feel that leaning into the process completely fall away, even if just for a few moments. But you get a real experiential taste of the mind of not wanting, not craving.

Right there is the truth of dukkha—of the wanting, the leaning being the cause of dukkha—and the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving. Just in that moment we are experiencing really the fullness of those noble truths.

Does this seem clear? It was really a significant understanding, so I would encourage you to play with it and see whether it has meaning for you as well.

The other teaching from the Buddha had the same effect but came at it from a different angle. One of the lines in the suttas that one reads very often—and it's often the statement people make when they get enlightened, their expression of awakening—is where they say they understand that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

I had read that so many times. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And I always took it, reading it for years and years, as a description of impermanence. Yes, that's true—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Then I was sitting on retreat—and it's so amazing, such a magical world you're living in, especially sitting for this long. It's like this great laboratory for understanding. I was sitting, just going on with my practice, and this line came to my mind quite spontaneously: Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

But instead of just seeing it as a description, I took it as an instruction. I dropped that sentence right into the midst of what was happening moment to moment. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And just in that moment of remembering, of really understanding that in the moment, again there was a realization: there's nothing to become. Because whatever it is that we want to become will also pass away.

Do you get it? It's really profound. It's like the whole teaching is right there. There is nothing to become

because whatever it is that we think we want to become is also just part of the passing show. Whatever it is—whether it's a meditative state or some experience of the body or the mind—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

So again, in that moment I could feel the mind just letting go of wanting anything. And then to really see, to pay attention to the quality of the mind in that moment that does not want anything—that's the experience of the end of craving. Even if it's just for a couple of moments of not wanting, we get a genuine taste of peace. It's the third noble truth: the end of suffering is the end of craving.

We can use these teachings around wanting or craving in this very moment-to-moment way and really experience the potential for freedom, experience the taste of it for ourselves. It's not theoretical. Of course, then we forget—we're back in the wanting to become this or that. But as some teachers say, our practice is short moments many times. It's not necessarily trying to hold on to that state, which would just be another kind of craving. But just for a moment, there's nothing to become. You can just feel everything let go.

For me, it was really very interesting. Even after all these years, after fifty years of practice, this line that I had read a million times drops in and some kind of new understanding of it opens up. That's the beauty of the Dharma—it's continually revealing itself in so many unexpected ways.

A question came about something I had said once: that every moment can be a moment of intimacy. Let me say something about that.

I've wanted to write a book for a long time. It's basically a one-paragraph book, and the title is *The Myth of Intimacy*. The myth is that it takes two to be intimate. People in their lives are looking for intimacy in an other—thinking that if I'm in a relationship with someone else, that will be how I experience intimacy. But my experience in practice over all these years is the intimacy of being totally at one with experience. When we're totally feeling the breath, or a sensation, or a sound, there's no separation. And in that non-separation—really, intimacy is non-separation.

This is why the practice, and this is what people who don't practice find very difficult to understand, can be so completely fulfilling. Just think of how somebody you know who's not familiar with meditation would react if they came and just saw people lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing—they'd probably fall asleep just watching. What a boring thing to do! And yet, I presume that at least at times you've had the experience of being so intimate with the sensations of movement. It's why people can be walking for half an hour or forty-five minutes or an hour, or sitting for very long periods, completely fulfilled in the experience—because it's so intimate. There's no separation.

It's very relieving to understand that intimacy doesn't depend on anyone else. It depends on how we're relating to the moment's experience.

In my early days in India, my first teacher was Anagarika Munindra, and he was a very quirky guy. Sometimes—this was in Bodh Gaya—we'd be walking around the villages, and he said something that at

the time I thought was pretty hokey. But over the years of my practice, I totally came to appreciate it. As we were walking about, he would say, "I'm never bored. I'm friends with the clouds. I'm friends with the sun. I'm friends with whatever was around us." And it was so true—that's how he was. He was totally engaged in the moment's experience. Over the years of practice, I really came to appreciate the power of that.

So that's what I mean by every moment's experience can be a moment of intimacy—if we're really there, if we're connected, if we're aware, if we're mindful.

Some years ago I was teaching in Italy at a monastery—a Catholic monastery that a group had rented, up in the mountains of Tuscany. It was a beautiful, beautiful place. The monastery was a thousand years old. This made me think about how IMS, a couple of years ago, celebrated its fortieth anniversary, and we thought, "Yes, this is great." But that put it into perspective. I mean, it's quite amazing that that monastery had been there for a thousand years.

Above the monastery, there was a hermitage where some monks lived. We could go and visit it, and they had one little cottage—I don't know exactly what to call it—just two small rooms. Monks would be staying in them, with a little walled garden. And they went in for life, into that solitude. Perhaps they joined the other monks in the church for the liturgies during the day, but other than that, there was no communication.

So I went into this sample unit. I just wanted to get a sense of it, because the thought of somebody going in for life, that commitment—it intrigued me. I went in, and quite to my surprise—of course, I didn't go in for life, I went in for about fifteen minutes—but what surprised me was that even in those fifteen minutes, I got a glimmer, a glimmer of the joy that could be found there. In my mind I thought, "Oh yes, to go into a situation like that where one's only companion is awareness, and one spends one's life in companionship with awareness." I got so high just from the thought of it. After a couple of weeks I might not have been so high if I were actually there, but these retreats offer a taste of that. Even though it's not in solitude, there is a kind of solitude here. And the power of it, because it is so intimate with experience—there's a great joy that's possible as we drop into that.

A practitioner shared, "I've heard some of this from you, on and off, for almost twenty years now. There's always been so much we've had from you. But wow. Thank you. Just to thank you."

To me, this is one of the most amazing things about the practice and about retreats like this. The Dharma is vast. It's just so vast as we're going into the nature of the mind and consciousness, and how our lives are the manifestation of that, and how even after decades and decades of practice, new things are continually emerging—new insights and new ways of seeing things and of unhooking. This is what makes it so extraordinary. It's really an extraordinary journey.

Someone then asked about overconcentration. He explained that he'd been experiencing what I

sometimes call the "beautiful breath"—the energy in the breath becoming quite vivid, sensation arising in space, where you don't really know exactly where the boundaries are. But he noticed that when practicing this at home, he went to speak with his father afterward and really didn't understand a word his father said. He didn't know who he was. It was very strange. He also noticed that when he had an incessant thought about wanting to ask me a question and then went to bed, everything was totally lost—he didn't even remember that he'd been thinking about it constantly. And it wasn't so pleasant because the energy in the mind felt slightly different.

So the question was about what happens when the mind becomes very one-pointed, absorbed in the breath, and then there's difficulty coming out of it—feeling disoriented from having been so deeply immersed in that experience, struggling to relate even in ordinary conversation.

I would say a couple of things. It might be interesting in that state, when you're really immersed in the breath, to take some periods of time within it—maybe five minutes or ten minutes at a time—to use some mental noting. I don't know if you've ever used that as a tool, but not only noting the breath itself but also noting the mind state. So you might be noting "calm, calm, peaceful," or if there's light, you might note "seeing"—whatever your experience is. It could be that the concentration is getting stronger than the mindfulness.

But in making these adjustments, it's like a very delicate adjustment. It doesn't take much. It might just take a little bit to up the level of mindfulness within that very experience. I would include the noting of the mind state as well as the actual physical sensation of the breath. And it would just be interesting to see if then the transition from that state—opening the eyes, standing up, and doing whatever you do next—whether there's a more unbroken continuity without that sense of disjointedness.

Now, regarding the question about fear coming up in the practice—just as an example, what might there be fear of? What's the experience you might be having that is conditioning the fear to arise? Something to do with seeing that there is no outside world and no inside world, something like that.

There are a couple of things I can share. I've worked a lot with fear. Of all the afflictive emotions, just in the course of my practice, that was the one most predominant in my conditioning. So I have a lot of experience with it. There were times when the fear was so strong in my practice that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It was completely irrational, but for whatever reason that emotion was just let loose. It was very powerful and disorienting.

One thing that's really important is to become mindful of your relationship to fear itself. How are you relating to the fear? We can be relating to fear in a wide variety of ways. One way—and this sounds like it might be happening to some extent—is where we get identified with the fear and are really caught up in it. That influences how we're relating to the rest of our experience because we're identified with the fear.

Another way, which I fell into for a long time, was aversion to the fear. Because it's really unpleasant—it's

like the mental equivalent of physical pain. Fear is an unpleasant emotion, and so very often the fear would arise, and I would be recognizing it and even noting it: "fear, fear, fear"—but always with the wanting it to go away.

This illuminated a really important distinction for me, one I think is essential for all of us in practice: there's a difference between recognition and mindfulness. Very often we think if we recognize something, we're being mindful. But as I was doing, I was recognizing the fear—"fear, fear, fear"—but it was not mindfulness because I was recognizing it through the filter of aversion, of not liking it, of wanting it to go away.

And so there was a big turning point for me—and this took a long time, years actually. I'm hoping what I'm saying might spare you a couple of years of practice. I was doing walking meditation right outside here during a retreat, having worked with this for a long, long time, and then something just settled. I really got accepting of the feeling of fear. That acceptance was expressed in the thought in my mind: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay."

And that changed everything, because that was the first moment of acceptance. All that time before, I knew it, I recognized it, but I was not accepting it. As soon as I dropped into "okay, fear"—just like with physical pain—"okay, it's unpleasant, but it's okay. It's okay to feel it"—that became a little mantra for me with a lot of difficult things, but particularly with fear. It's okay.

That became my mantra. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. And the whole mass of fear just washed through. It was amazing. Something that I had felt so locked into—I had built this whole story about myself as a fearful person, convinced I would need thirty years of therapy to unwind it. I was creating an entire self-image and narrative around this fear. But as soon as I could accept it—it's okay—everything shifted.

Now, this doesn't mean fear never comes up again, but the relationship to it is completely different. So that's one big piece. I would really look at how you're relating to fear, allowing the fear itself to become the object not only of your recognition but of genuine mindfulness—which means accepting. Fear is like this. Fear feels like this. This could really change your relationship to it.

As you move through certain meditative experiences—because we are deconstructing some very long-established habit patterns of mind, the core one being this very reified sense of self—our whole life has been revolving around this idea. Meditation begins to loosen that a bit, and it can get fearful at times. We're often in unknown territory. Learning how to be okay with fear allows us to settle into whatever experience is unfolding.

There's one other piece. Sometimes the fear gets overwhelming. We've tried to really be with it, to be mindful of it, to get okay with it, but for whatever reason, at some particular time, we don't have the capacity to open to the fear itself. We feel the mind getting out of balance. When that happens, it can be helpful to back off a little, to take ourselves out of that particular experience. If you're sitting, it might be

okay to go for a walk, or to open to sounds, to listening—just to change the arena of your experience in a way that brings you back to some kind of balance. Then, when you feel balanced in your practice, you can return to it, willing to enter into it a little bit and see whether you can stay balanced even in the experience of fear. That mental balance within the experience is what's important.

This would be good to discuss with your teachers, because sometimes they can see whether you're actually out of balance. People sometimes think they're out of balance, or they're really anxious about what's happening, but the teacher can often perceive whether it's really okay. They would encourage you to stay with it, open to it, be with the fear—it's okay. Or they may see that you're getting truly out of balance and need to move away from that for a while. These are two different approaches, but this is not uncommon. The fact that fear is arising, in and of itself, is not a problem, because it commonly arises at different times. So you can try the magic mantra: it's okay, it's okay.

An image might help—and this might be a nice note to end on. An image I've found helpful in dealing with difficult mind states and emotions, fear being a good example among many: How would you be with a child who's really afraid? I think instinctively we would all know the appropriate way to be with that child. If the child is really scared, we would probably just be there. Either in words or simply through how we are, we would express that sense: it's okay. We wouldn't deny it, saying, "Oh no, you're not really feeling that." And we probably wouldn't say, "Just stop it," or "You shouldn't be feeling that." No, we would know. We would just be there—putting our arm around the child, supporting them, being in the experience with them, trying to create a place of safety.

I think we all know this very instinctively. But what's interesting is that we know what to do if it were a child, yet we don't apply it to ourselves. When we're the ones caught up in the difficult emotion, we can get all tangled up in our reactivity to it.

So you might just see if that image is of some help.

I could go on and we could go on, but if we did, when I go back into the staff room with my colleagues, I'd be hearing about it.

So it's really a delight. Thank you for the opportunity.

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