Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:06:43

Good to be with you all this evening. Thanks for the many questions. Clearly I'm not going to get to all of them, but they were all really great. Each one of them could be an hour dharma talk, but I'm going to try to compress the answers a bit.

The first question was about dukkha: Where is dukkha found in the breath? This question opens up a lot, namely a deeper understanding of what dukkha means. Usually, and even traditionally, dukkha is translated as suffering. In the Four Noble Truths, the first noble truth is the truth of dukkha, and it's often translated as the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path.

But suffering as an English translation of that word is sometimes confusing, as indicated by this question. How is the breath dukkha? We generally don't experience it as suffering. The Buddha made a very global statement about dukkha. He said all conditioned things are dukkha. What are all conditioned things? Everything. Everything except Nibbana, the unconditioned. So all of our experience the Buddha is encompassing with this term.

If we think of it simply as suffering, it doesn't quite make sense because we have a lot of happy, joyous, pleasant experiences in our lives and we generally don't feel them to be suffering. So what does the Buddha mean when he says all conditioned things are dukkha?

Suffering is one aspect of it. Clearly when we're in pain, either physical pain or emotional pain, or see the suffering of others, we can really see that as suffering. But dukkha also means unreliability—that things are not ultimately reliable or ultimately satisfying precisely because they don't last. In this respect, the insight into impermanence and the insight into dukkha are very intertwined. Things are unreliable, ultimately not satisfying, because they're continually changing.

As a little sidebar, I came across another expression in the suttas that really stood out to me. It was another way of expressing the truth of change, an unusual phrase in English. The Buddha talked about things having the nature to change, to become otherwise. I love that—things always becoming otherwise. For me it highlighted and made more vivid the experience of change. Things change, everybody knows that, and we don't even give it a second thought. But somehow "things continually becoming otherwise" really highlights the basic instability of our experience due to its changing nature.

Going back to the original question: Where is dukkha found in the breath? If we think of it in this second, larger meaning—not simply as suffering but as unreliable, or always becoming otherwise—we can see the dukkha in the breath in several ways.

The breath is always changing, becoming otherwise. For a good part of our lives, maybe breathing is very easeful. But there are situations where people have a breath that's not easeful at all, that's very labored, or there's some disease or illness causing actual suffering in the breath. So there's dukkha there.

And this is not going to come as any surprise to you: the breath is ultimately not satisfying because at a certain point we're going to stop breathing. If we're hoping to take refuge in the breath as a place for ultimate peace or ultimate refuge, it's not going to work, because it is a conditioned phenomenon that comes with certain causes. Our bodies get older, we get sick, they're going to die, the breath stops.

This is one of the key meanings of dukkha, because the Buddha was pointing to a realization of that which is an ultimate refuge, which is not subject to change, which is ultimately reliable. When you read the discourses of the suttas, in many different places the Buddha gives a lot of synonyms for Nibbana. They all imply that's the experience that can be counted on, that is not becoming otherwise, that is reliable, that is the ultimate refuge of peace.

I hope this gives you some sense of how we can understand the Buddha's statement that all conditioned phenomena are dukkha. It's not only suffering; it's that unreliability because of the nature of everything to change, to become otherwise.

The next question was about physical pain. Have you had any experience of that in your time here? Probably. The question: "You have said there was a year of your practice where your body felt like twisted metal. Do you have any advice for how to work with intense unpleasantness in the body which has been going on for some time?"

Given the nature of the body and its tendency to continually become otherwise, it's inevitable for all of us that at different times we're going to experience painful sensations. It's simply part of being alive. There's nobody who escapes that. There's nobody who has only pleasant sensations throughout their lives.

So I had to work with it, and as the question indicated, I've worked with a lot of physical pain over the years at different times. During this one particular period, it was protracted—my body just, as I described it to myself, felt like twisted steel. And it took me a long time to figure out how to work with it skillfully.

Because, as you will probably recognize, especially when there's intense discomfort in the body, what's our usual response to it? We don't like it. We want to get rid of it. There's some kind of aversion. And it almost feels like the normal response to painful feelings. Well, it may be normal, but it's not helpful—because the aversion to the pain, the wanting to get rid of it, actually increases it. The contraction of that aversion, the tightness, the pushing away, just makes everything tighter.

So in a way it's counterintuitive, but the way of being with pain—and there are several different subtleties to this—but generally speaking, it's to remind ourselves, and this takes practice, to relax behind it, to open to it, rather than contract and push it away. That relaxation, that opening, allowing, making space for the sensation.

One way of doing this is in a very focused, narrow way, if there's a particular area of pain in the body. But perhaps an easier way is to really start becoming mindful of the whole body, a whole body awareness. A note that I've used in other contexts but which could be useful here comes from the Satipatthāna Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness, where the Buddha says, "Be mindful"—and then in the equivalent of quotation marks—"'there is a body,' to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness."

That phrase, "there is a body," I started using a lot in my practice. In sitting, in walking: there is a body. Now, this is not a metaphysical statement. It's not to get involved philosophically—is there a body? Isn't there a body? It's not that. It's much simpler. It's just a way of creating a frame, a large frame: there is a body. So we settle into that whole body awareness.

I found that when I do that, it's much easier to just settle back and be open to whatever sensations, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are arising within the frame. It's that frame—there is a body—which gives us a place of stability to rest in, so that we can feel the unpleasantness without reactivity. Because sometimes if we just dive right into the pain, we get into a kind of tussle with it. But if we give ourselves a larger context, a larger framework—oh, there's a body, and then within that, oh, unpleasant sensations just arising and passing and changing as they do—it makes it much easier to settle into that space of allowing, of openness, of being non-reactive.

As we do this, it's a very interesting process that we begin to understand. In that space of openness and allowing, it's as if we create the space for whatever tensions we've accumulated, or energetic knots, or whatever is causing the pain, to actually unwind. There's a healing process that goes on when we can be softly, gently aware of unpleasant sensations. It's like we're giving them the space to unwind, to disentangle.

Just one example of that: I noticed, very often especially some time ago in my practice, when I'd be busy in the world and then go on retreat, the first few days my shoulders were killing me. Just so much discomfort and pain. Why? Because I had been carrying tension that I didn't even know I was carrying. In the course of our busy lives, we accumulate a lot of tension. It becomes normal to us. We're not even really aware that we're carrying it. At the beginning of the retreat, I'd wonder, why are my shoulders hurting so much? And then I realized—yes, because they were up to my ears. That's exaggerating a little bit. But I noticed that it didn't take long; over a few days of just that allowing space, the shoulders started relaxing, the pain started unwinding. It was a release.

So you understand that creating the space of allowing permits the release of a lot of the tension and pain that's there.

This is another question related to dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. How can observing the changing sensations in my feet while walking convince me that nothing can bring me lasting satisfaction? I've never been looking for satisfaction in my feet.

It's probably a question that has arisen for many of you. What is this all about? Why am I watching my feet?

Well, first to say, we might be looking for satisfaction in our feet when they start hurting. Normally, maybe they're not hurting, and so we're not really looking for much. But that's the kind of obvious thing.

There's a more profound way of understanding what this question is pointing to. And that is a really important level shift in the meditation practice: when the mind goes from experiencing the concept of things to the direct experience of them. This at first may seem obvious, but there are a lot of subtle manifestations of it.

We'll take walking meditation, but it can apply to sitting or to any activity at all. It's very possible to be walking and to be mindful of the movement, but still with a subtle overlay—a subtle overlay of an image of foot or leg as we're moving. And it's almost as if we're feeling the sensations of the movement through that overlay. It can be really subtle. But it would be interesting for you to explore and just see whether you notice that happening.

Why is it so important to see the difference between the concept level and the level of direct experience? When we're experiencing the world through concepts—and the concepts don't have only to do with the body—we're living mostly in the world of concepts. When you look outside and you see a tree or a house or a car, those are all concepts. The eye does not see tree. The eye sees color and form and light and shadow, and then the mind perceives that and creates a concept: tree, or house, or whatever it is.

More intimately, we do that with this mind and body. When we are experiencing the body through the filter of the concept—even of body. Body is a concept. Foot is a concept. Leg is a concept. So when you're walking, you are not feeling your foot, because there is no sensation called foot. What you're experiencing is pressure or hardness or softness or lightness or warmth or coolness. Those are the sensations that are actually being felt. Foot and leg is a thought or an image that you're then overlaying on the bare sensations.

Now here's the critical point. Concepts don't change. We use the same word. Had a foot yesterday, foot today, foot tomorrow. Tree was there yesterday, tree is there today, tomorrow. So even though we may know intellectually that things are always changing, to the degree that we're living and experiencing things through the world of concepts—which is, I would say, almost all the time, except for experienced meditators—those concepts, which we're taking to be the reality, are camouflaging the truth of change, the experience of change. Whereas when we are feeling the actual sensations, they are changing all the time.

So when we have dropped down into direct experience—whether it's in movement or in sitting, just the actual felt sensations of the body—that's when our mind is really diving deeply into the experience of the truth of change.

There's another implication here that has very strong ramifications for understanding selflessness. As you

probably know, it's not hard to understand even conceptually the truth of change or dukkha, but selflessness is really counter-intuitive, and it's that aspect of the teachings that people often have the most questions about. What does that mean?

This going from the world or the level of concept to direct experience directly addresses this understanding of selflessness. When we're walking with that overlay of concept—of foot or leg—it's an easy move from foot or leg to my foot and my leg. I'm the one who owns it, or to whom it belongs. It would be completely natural and normal to be talking in these terms: my arm hurts, or my foot hurts, or whatever. It's very easy to add on the I and mine to the concept, because the concept is not changing.

But I don't think anybody would say "my pressure" or "my lightness," or "I am pressure."

When we're on the level of the actual elements and in the experience of their changing nature, the understanding and realization of selflessness becomes so much more apparent. There's a phrase that I've loved since the beginning of my practice, describing this whole process: *empty phenomena rolling on*—em pty of self. It's just different elements of mind and body, all conditioned, meaning they arise when the conditions are present. Conditions change, and the experience changes.

So our whole lives—and it's fine to use conventional language, I'm not suggesting we drop all language of self and other and I—the language is fine. But we don't want to get trapped in the language, reifying it as being reflective of actual experience. Because when we do, when that strong sense of self arises because we're seeing things through concept, that's where a lot of attachment comes. We're attached to my body. We're identified with my body. But as I said, we wouldn't be attached to pressure, tightness, whatever the particular elements are. It's so clearly impersonal. When we're on that level of direct experience, that's when we begin to see the momentary changing nature of everything that's arising. And this really undercuts the powerful tendency to identify with what's going on as being self.

Is this making sense? It does to me. I'm hoping I'm conveying it in a way that it does to you as well.

Now, identification with sticky thoughts. The question was about working with the stickiest thoughts that show up over and over and freak us out—that was not the exact language in the question, I cleaned it up a little bit. The person wrote, "I'm still in a world of believing them, identifying with them when they arise. What techniques can help cultivate non-belief and non-identification with them?"

This is a really big question in meditation practice: how to cut through our identification with the thinking process, because that identification is the cause of so much suffering in our lives. This is the *dukkha*, the suffering of pain, and the habit is so deeply conditioned in us. Even as we begin to get a sense of the physical elements and constant change, even as we begin to see the impersonality of it—not I, not mine—we so easily fall into "I'm thinking." I'm the one who thinks, these are my thoughts.

One of the most freeing aspects, especially in a long retreat where you have a chance to see this over and over again over extended periods of time, is that we slowly begin to see thoughts really in the same way

that we might be with sensations in the body—that they are impersonal. There's a phrase that I first heard my teacher Munindraji use, though I've heard other people use it as well, and it really expresses a better understanding of thought. It says: *the thought is the thinker*. The thought is thinking itself. It's not that the thought belongs to anyone. It's not my thought. The thought arises out of a whole host of conditions—background and upbringing and education. There are a lot of reasons why different thoughts come, but they're all impersonal. They don't belong to me. I am not the thought, even though we generally tend to think we are.

So how can we begin to break this identification? You've probably experimented with a lot of ways yourself. I'll just mention a few things that have been helpful for me. One is basic to the meditation instructions: simply using a mental note. Noting "thinking" or "planning" or "judging" or "fantasizing," whatever it is. Because in the moment of making the note—and the note has to be really soft and gentle, because if you're noting "thinking, thinking, thinking" again and again, that's not mindfulness, that's just increasing aversion. So the note has to be really soft, gentle, accepting, allowing. It's just acknowledging. Noting "thinking." Even "judging," but with a soft tone of voice. Because in the moment of making that mental note—

we are not identified with the thought. That's the power of mindfulness. When we're mindful that we're thinking, and the note is helping us be mindful of it—so the note is a support for mindfulness—in that moment of mindfulness of the thought, we are not identified with it.

And we see more clearly. Again, over and over again, it would be interesting if somehow we could count the number of thoughts we have in a three-month retreat. It would be a big number. But with the noting, we just see over and over again: okay, we're not identified. And we see them coming and going, coming and going, coming and going. They start to lose their hold on us. We're not so seduced by them.

And as you've probably heard in the instructions, it can be particularly helpful if you have certain patterns of thought to give a very specific note—the ones that typically seduce you again and again into becoming lost in them. Planning, or memory, or whatever it is, whatever your top ten are—to give a specific note. This is just the most basic way of being with thoughts.

Another way, which I find even more interesting, particularly when there are a lot of thoughts going through the mind, is simply to ask the question: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying—what is a thought as a phenomenon? Very few people ever ask this question. We are totally seduced and carried away by the storyline of the thoughts, the content of the thoughts. And it's very rare that anybody even thinks of looking directly, investigating: Well, what is a thought?

I find this completely fascinating, because we can investigate right in the middle of having them. So the thoughts are there, and if we remember, "Oh, what is that?" the question inspires us to really look directly at it as it's happening. We see that the thought is little more than nothing. It's just this little ephemeral energetic wisp—something that's hardly there. And when we look directly at it, it becomes so obvious.

What is it? As I say, it's little more than nothing.

And yet, when we're unaware of the nature of thought, they completely dominate our lives. Our thoughts run us ragged. Go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced, whatever. Our whole lives, it's like we're slaves to these thoughts. So that's on the one hand. And on the other hand, when we look carefully at the nature of thought, we see there's hardly anything there.

To see this again and again creates an amazing place of greater freedom and greater peace in our lives. Because it's not that the thoughts stop coming, but our relationship to them over time changes dramatically. It's not to say we never get caught—even after many years of practice, we get caught again and again—but much less. Instead of living in the world of our story, we begin to see: No, these are just thoughts or images arising and passing in the mind. They really can have very little, if any, impact if we're not choosing to invest in them.

There are some thoughts which we will want to invest in. So I'm not saying that thoughts are bad or that we shouldn't be having them. Obviously they're a big part of how we function in the world. But because we don't understand their essentially empty nature, we have a much harder time discerning clearly: "Oh yeah, this thought is helpful, let me act on it. This thought is not helpful, let it just go."

I would really suggest you investigate this realm of experience, because it is so predominant in our lives and has such overwhelming impact. And there is the possibility, through our own investigation, through our own awareness, through a clear seeing of thoughts, to really free up a lot of space within ourselves. So you can definitely use the thought process as a vehicle for investigation, for clarity, and for greater freedom.

One more thing about thoughts—this is just a little meditative suggestion. We all have the experience of sitting with the breath, the body, whatever, and thoughts come, and often we get carried away by them for either a shorter or longer period of time. That's really common. But at a certain point with every thought, we wake up from being lost. For as many times as we're lost, that many times do we awaken from being lost.

But the tendency of most meditators, in the moment of waking up from being lost, is judgment about having been lost.

"Oh, I was lost again. How many times? How long is this going to go on?" And we get into another whole lost-in-thought trend.

Rather than that, if you can remember, in that moment when you awaken from being lost—now you're in it, in it, in it, and then for a certain moment, "Oh, thinking"—in that very moment, delight in the wakefulness rather than judging yourself for having been lost. It will make you much happier because, as I said, as many times as you've been lost, that many times you will awaken. So why not cultivate delight in the wakefulness rather than judgment about having been lost?

Not only does this affect our mood and energize us, it also highlights and clarifies in a very immediate way the difference between delusion and wisdom, between ignorance and awareness. Right in that moment—being lost, lost, lost—that's just ignorance. We're lost in the thought. We are not mindful of what we're thinking. We're completely in the story. That is delusion. In the moment of waking up, that's wakefulness. That's awareness. That's wisdom. Right there in that moment, we get such a vivid understanding of the difference between the two. And because the difference becomes much clearer, it's easier to access that wisdom space of mind, because we see clearly what it is.

I have found this to be of huge interest not only in formal meditation but just going through the day. It's one of the things that delights me about the practice. I can just be going for a walk around the loop, being as mindful as I can, but not in a forced or intensive way—just walking, going for a walk, trying to be mindful. And I notice, even as I'm feeling my body moving, how many times the mind will slip into a thought train, even if it's just for twenty seconds or a minute. It can be a very light, unobtrusive thought that normally I would just not even pay attention to because it's not problematic. But because I've been practicing what I've just been talking about, it's fascinating to see how in the course of our daily life and activities we're dropping into delusion and out of it, into delusion and out of it, many more times than we realize.

I guess this is a piece of bad news: we're more deluded than we think we are. In a strange way, when I saw that, it delighted me, because it came as a surprise. This is fairly recent in the course of my practice—paying attention to this dropping in and out of being lost, just in moving about. It was a bit shocking to see how often the mind just dropped into the story of whatever it was. Again, it doesn't have to be dramatic. It doesn't even have to be problematic. It's just a totally innocuous thought. But we're lost. We're not aware. We're in delusion. So for me, this has just become a really interesting place to practice.

Can you give any words of encouragement or advice for practicing through dark times and how to approach practice at such a time?

First, it's important to understand that both in meditation and in our lives, this is going to happen. We all go through hard, difficult, challenging times. This is just part of life. So the first thing is to realize it's not a mistake and it's not some aberration. It doesn't mean you're a bad person or a bad meditator or anything like that. It's just part of life. Sometimes things are going smoothly and easily, and sometimes really challenging things come up—whether physically, emotionally, psychologically, or in the situation of the world. Sometimes things are really hard.

So how can we practice at those times? Everything I'm about to say can be understood within the frame of: How can I find a place of openness and allowing in those times, so we don't contract and we don't drown in the difficulty?

Then the question is how to do that. Something that is really helpful—and sometimes challenging—is to get very precise about whatever feelings or emotions we're having in the midst of the difficult time, the

challenging time.

And it can be a wide range. There could be fear or despair or unhappiness or anxiety—there's a long list of what in Buddhism are called the afflictive emotions, those emotions that cause suffering for us. But in order to come to a place of openness, where we are allowing ourselves to feel them without aversion, without trying to push them away, very often we need to be aware precisely of what it is.

I'll just say as a little footnote to that statement: sometimes if the mindfulness is really strong and the emotion is not overwhelming, the precision about what it is is not needed. We could just use a general term—difficult emotion or difficult feeling. And occasionally that would be enough to disidentify. But more often than not, when the situation is really challenging for us, we need to be specific.

Let me give you a few examples of this. At one time in my practice, for whatever reason, I was having this really strong emotion of sadness. It just felt so challenging. I was noting sadness, sadness, sadness. But the noting didn't seem to help at all, and there didn't seem to be any movement. So I got interested and looked more carefully. What actually am I feeling? And it wasn't sadness—it was unhappiness.

It was interesting to me because one might say they're closely related, but they are really quite different emotions. As soon as I could name it precisely—unhappiness—my mind came into alignment with what was present. And it was the alignment that made the acceptance possible. As long as I was misnaming it, I wasn't able to accept it because I was not aligned with what was actually there. As soon as I noted it correctly—oh, this is unhappiness—there was a kind of energetic uplift through the clarity of the recognition. My entanglement with it got much less because then I could actually be mindful of it.

One word of caution with this, because you've all been sitting a long time and I could just imagine—next time you're sitting and you have some emotion, you spend an hour and a half going through a whole list: is it this, is it this? Do not drive yourself crazy with this. What I'm suggesting is to really work with this investigation at those times when for whatever reason you feel stuck in some emotion, where you feel so entangled with it. That's the time to settle back, try out a few different possibilities, and see if you can land on the right one. If not, let it go and continue with your practice. But there will be times when just that move actually frees up the whole thing.

Another pair that often get confused is anxiety and fear. Again, they could be close, but they are different emotions. If we're misnaming or misperceiving, we may not get in alignment with what's there and find it more difficult to be accepting of it.

So clear recognition is really helpful. That's the question in the dark times: to really see, what actually is going on? And there's another thought related to what I said earlier. This is a shift from a concept—"I'm going through such a hard time"—to simply being mindful of the actual emotion that's present. In the first approach, we're reinforcing the sense of self and drowning in the difficulty. When we go to the direct experience of the emotion, then it's possible to see it without identifying with it. To see: yes, this emotion is

arising out of whatever conditions, but it's also a passing phenomenon. It's like a storm cloud passing through the sky. And that allowing, that openness, permits the movement. It allows for the release.

There is something of critical importance in working with challenging emotions, in the dark times. This is an addendum to what I said about clear recognition. Recognition and mindfulness are two different things, because we can recognize what's there—even have the recognition correct, correctly perceiving what's present—but that recognition by itself is not mindfulness. It can support mindfulness, but it's possible to recognize what's there and be with it through a filter of desire or aversion. We could recognize, for example, pleasant vedanā—pleasant feeling, whether in the body or the mind. We recognize that.

But if we are perceiving it through a filter of wanting, of desire, of clinging, that's not mindfulness. And that keeps us entangled. Or if it's unpleasant, aversive, if it's an afflictive emotion—we might recognize accurately what's there, but if we're seeing it through the filter of "I don't like this, I want to get rid of it, I want it to go away," that's not mindfulness. And in fact, that aversion is just going to lock it in.

So we want to use the skill of accurate recognition. What is it that's actually here? But then—and this is a teaching from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a really wonderful Burmese monk whom many of you might know—one of his suggestions in practice is just to frequently ask the question: "What's the attitude in my mind about what I'm experiencing?" So it's not only the recognition, but we're also looking at how we're relating to it. And that is absolutely key. That really begins to hone your understanding and appreciation of what mindfulness means, as opposed to simply being in the present or even accurately recognizing what's there. Mindfulness is something in addition. It is being with whatever it is without the greed, without the clinging, without the aversion, without the identification.

All these pieces have to come together, and over time they become natural. Perhaps as people are beginning their practice, they really have to think of each of these things and work with them. But at a certain point, this becomes the habit of your practice. Still, I think it's worth highlighting, because sometimes it's super subtle.

Just another example. One time I was just sitting—normal, ordinary sitting. I was feeling my breath, nothing special going on at all. And then I remembered U Tejaniya's suggestion with that question. So that question arose in my mind: "What's the attitude in my mind?" And it was just for the breath—nothing even very problematic or dramatic.

It was so interesting. I'm just feeling the breath, and this question arises: "What's the attitude?" Simply by asking that question—not even looking for an answer, just by asking the question—I could feel my mind drop back from a wanting that I didn't even know was there. It was very subtle. You might call it an energetic leaning into the next moment, like wanting the next breath, or maybe some undetected wanting to get more concentrated. Something. There was something extra to simply feeling the breath as it was. And that question effected that release. "What's the attitude?" It was amazing, and it highlighted again some of the subtle nuances or refinements of what mindfulness means. We can think we're being mindful,

and still there can be that subtle "I want this, I want more of this, I want less of this." So I think it's worth just playing with it.

There are a lot more questions, but only two minutes left. I just want to share with you one thing that came out of my own fairly recent practice in the last year or two. I may have mentioned this in the P1 if I came for a Q&A during that time, but it really has had a very big impact on my practice, so I'd like to share it with you.

There's one statement or teaching in the texts that comes up again and again. I must have read it a million times. It's a very simple statement. It just says: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." This is basically a statement of the truth of change. But when people really

let it in in a profound way. As the stories go, sometimes people would just hear that phrase and become enlightened. "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." And then—awakening.

I was on a self-retreat, sitting in meditation, and things were going along really smoothly. I was just in the flow, in the flow of empty phenomena rolling on. And then this thought arose: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." But because it came right in the middle of a sitting where I was quite absorbed in the process, it had greater resonance. It wasn't just an intellectual "oh yes, whatever arises will pass away." It really landed. It was almost like that line was emerging from within the process itself. So it was very powerful.

But then my mind did something unexpected. "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want." I'm speaking particularly with respect to the meditative process—because whatever I might be wanting will also pass away. And it was interesting. Similar to what happened when I asked the question "What's the attitude?" I could feel the mind drop back from any kind of wanting at all.

And there was one more piece to this. I got really interested in the quality of the mind, the nature of the mind free of any wanting. It perhaps lasted only a few moments, but it was very dramatic. "Oh, there's nothing to want." And then experiencing that mind.

What became so vivid was this realization: this is really what our practice is about. What we're practicing is not-wanting. But I know for myself, and from working with thousands of yogis, it's so easy in our practice to get caught up in meditative wanting—we want something, whatever it may be. But this end of wanting is precisely the Third Noble Truth. When the Buddha spoke about the truth of dukkha and the cause of dukkha, which is craving or wanting, the end of dukkha is the end of craving. And then there's the whole path.

If we can remind ourselves right in the midst of our practice, as we're practicing, "There's nothing to want"—everything keeps going on. It's not that things stop happening, but there's no entanglement. We're not being caught by the wanting and then all the actions which proceed from wanting. So what I do now,

very often when I'm sitting or at any time, that phrase will come: "Oh, there's nothing to want." And it's always a moment of peace.

I'd like to highlight the very essence of the practice. This is the practice of freedom. It's not the practice of simply developing another conditioned state, however wholesome that state may be. And there are many—the Buddha spoke about developing different qualities, and all of that is fine. We can develop them all and they're all part of the path. But can we do that from a place of understanding rather than from a place of wanting? Do you see the difference?

I find it tremendously inspiring to realize that we can really touch the depth of what the Buddha taught, even if it's just for a few moments at a time. The wanting is going to come back, and we'll get caught again and again. But this gives us a real taste of possibility. It gives us a real taste of freedom.

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