Q&A with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:08:09

So just on behalf of the teaching team, I want to say a big thank you to Joseph for being here tonight, and me personally for him choosing my talk night to get a pass for this evening.

Thank you for all of your questions. Just to say there were a lot—there was a veritable blizzard of bits of paper in the basket. I know we're not going to get time to cover all of them tonight. We teachers can try to follow up with some that we don't get to in the morning reflections over the next few days. If some of them feel a bit more urgent, you might bring them to your practice teachers or to Shelly. And some of them were a little more themed around practice in daily life, so we'll save those ones for closer towards the end of the retreat.

I've got a list here of all the questions that came in. A lot of them began with a lot of gratitude for Joseph. So just to save time, I'll read one representative gratitude, and then you can assume that the rest of them had a similar preface. It says, "I wanted to share my deepest gratitude for all you've done to bring the Dharma to the West. If it weren't for you, I would not have encountered these teachings, and they have profoundly changed my life in such a positive way." So that was a pretty common theme.

Okay, ready for the first one? Well, the Four Noble Truths start with suffering, so the first question says: "Dear Joseph, you have said, 'Don't waste your suffering.' Can you please elaborate on what you mean?"

*Joseph Goldstein:** Yes, this is one of my new favorite mantras. It came about really out of my own practice being on retreat and just dealing with the same things that you will deal with. Sometimes it's going really smoothly and sometimes things are coming up—either in the meditation process itself or just things from our life experience and unresolved difficulties where we're still caught in something.

At a certain point in my practice, I really developed a very keen interest in understanding the causes of suffering in my own mind. Because we can't control outer circumstances very much. But we are completely responsible for our own minds. And if there's suffering in the mind, there's something going on that's causing it—which is, of course, the first two noble truths.

What I found interesting is that very often the habits we have when we're facing either mild or even quite intense suffering—very often there's just a habit of drowning in it and ruminating about it and going over and over, not leading anyplace. At other times, there can be a tendency to blame either other people or a situation, and it's their fault that I'm suffering. That's wasting one's suffering. Because as Ajahn Chah once said, that's just suffering that leads to more suffering.

So not wasting the suffering is actually turning the attention inward and taking interest in what's going on

in my mind that is the cause of this suffering. And there's always something. It might be we're attached to things being a certain way and they're not the way we like it to be. Or there's resistance to something. Or we're misperceiving something.

So the suggestion is to actually have these times of unease, distress, suffering pique your interest rather than it be a problem. Because I found that some of the most interesting insights come from that really direct investigation into the patterns in the mind in those moments that are the cause of that distress. So it's really transforming.

I don't know if you'll quite be at the point of saying, "Oh good, there's suffering! Let me take a look at it." Well, you can leave off "oh, that's good." But don't leave off "let me take a look at it." Because that's really where the freedom is going to be found.

And it's very impactful, because at that point, the Four Noble Truths are not theoretical. It's not Buddhist philosophy. We're in the midst of it. And we can really begin to develop a deep insight and see the potential for freedom within our own mind. That's what's meant by that: don't waste your suffering.

*Questioner:** So there were a few that are loosely themed around anattā or not-self, and I thought to just read you three or four, and then you can hopefully pick out what strikes you. So one is, "I've been discussing the..."

I've been discussing investigation with my interview teachers. What's the relationship between investigation and active or analytical thinking? Can they coexist in the process of insight? And the second part of that question is: are noting and feeling into the experience enough to get beneath the surface, to dismantle the sense of a separate self and penetrate deep truths like anatta and sunyata?

There were several related questions. One person asked: would you please share some practices for deepening our realization of anatta? Another inquired: what does uprooting greed and aversion have to do with the dissolution of self? For example, isn't just wanting to scratch an itch simply nature? And lastly: if we all share one awareness, why does that awareness only know one individual's nervous system, thoughts, and emotions? It seems this localization has a lot to do with the illusion of a separate self.

I'm too old for four questions in a row! But let me address anything in the terrain of self and not-self.

First, let me frame two general meanings or manifestations of anatta. One, which you're very familiar with, is simply the understanding of no-self—that in the midst of this whole mind-body process, the ongoing flow of mind-body elements, there's no one core unchanging element that is the "I," the self. Really, the word *self* is a designation for the process of change. We can use the word self and all the conventional language of I and you and other. All of that's fine if we're not deluded into thinking it refers to something real in itself, something substantial that's there as the core being of who I am—realizing that this terminology is simply a designation.

I'll give you a simple example I've been using for years, which may illustrate this more clearly. If you're sitting by the side of a river, we use the term "river," and people know what that means. But what actually is a river? The river is the flow of water. We use the term as a designation for that flow. It's not that "river," as a noun, refers to something in and of itself apart from that flow of water. That's all it is—a designation for something. Self is a designation.

Another example I use is a rainbow. A rainbow appears in the sky. We all delight in it; it's beautiful. But what is a rainbow? It's an appearance when certain conditions come together—light and moisture and air. When the conditions are right, a rainbow appears. But a rainbow is not a thing in itself; it's simply an appearance of certain conditions coming together.

So basically, we're all rainbows. Yes, how sweet! We're an appearance. Joseph is an appearance, a rainbow. The physical elements, all the mental factors, the different states of consciousness—they're all arising in a certain relationship, in a certain pattern, and we call the pattern "Joseph." But then we fall into the delusion of thinking that there's a Joseph somehow separate from this process of impersonal, changing elements.

Recently I was reading a book that highlighted something important for me. Given that self is just a concept, just a designation, why are we so fooled by it? We're fooled by this designation because it has a powerful hold on everybody. We have this strong sense of being someone. The book was actually rather science-minded—I could barely understand it—but a few concepts jumped out at me. It was talking about complexity theory and emergent properties. An emergent property is essentially saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Take a simple example: a car. You put all the parts of the car together—when it's still on the assembly line, all the parts are there, which is really what constitutes the car. But it's not quite a car yet; it doesn't go anyplace, it doesn't move. But you put these elements together in a certain way, and the emergent properties of a car show themselves. We get into it and drive.

So when I read this, I realized that yes, self is an emergent property of these mental and physical elements. If you put all these parts together in a certain way, what emerges is what we call self—relating as separate human beings, our conventional understanding. A light bulb went off for me. *Oh, well that's why it's so seductive*—because there is a certain level of reality to the notion of self as an emergent property.

But as one Tibetan teacher expressed it: yes, the self is real, but not *really* real. I think that captures it beautifully. It is real, and we live our lives in that way of relating. So it's not only important, it's something we all do—just living in that realm. But we think it's really real.

Unlike a car, which many people have disassembled, very few people have taken the time or undertaken the discipline to ask: what are really the constituent parts which together emerge in what we call self, or

relate to as self? It's on that deeper level that we begin to truly experience the three characteristics and the Four Noble Truths, because we see all of these different elements momentarily arising and passing, and there's no substantial reality to them.

The beauty of the practice in terms of how we live our lives is this: the more we investigate and explore the basic elements, the constituent parts that make up what we call self, and see their insubstantial, impersonal nature—and here's where the understanding of non-self comes in—the more we can live in the world of emergent reality but not be so attached to it. Because we understand on a deeper level that the processes involved are all impersonal, following their own laws. They're ungovernable.

This "ungovernable" is another word which many people don't realize is also a description of *anattā*. It's ungovernable in the sense that all of the elements are following their own laws, just like there are laws of chemistry or physics. They're following their own laws; they're not subject to our will. I could say, "Joseph, I've decided not to die." This body is following its own laws. It's not subject to my will.

Now, this doesn't mean that things are chaotic. Because when we understand the laws governing how things unfold, then if there's a desired goal or an aspiration, it's not simply to hope for it or wish for it or pray for it—it's to understand the lawful process of what conditions lead to that result. Then we can align ourselves, be in harmony with those conditions.

Everything is an example of this, but sometimes I think of the law of gravity. It's a law of science, and yet we sent a rocket to the moon. How? Because there was an understanding of the laws which determined gravity's holding force and what's needed to overcome it. So it's all lawful, but not under our control. It's not just according to our will. And that's where the wisdom factor is so essential in our lives.

If we want to be happy, if we want to be at peace, if we want to be compassionate and loving, it's not enough just to wish it. You have to come here and sit for six weeks or three months. That's really what we're all doing—coming to a deeper and deeper understanding of what leads to what. Then we can align ourselves with that lawful process.

All of this is just the manifestation of the selfless nature, the impersonal nature. And yet we can relate conventionally in the world, understanding that the sense of self exists as an emergent property. So it's not that we're throwing that out; it's just understanding its place.

The question reads: Can you explain and advise how wise discernment is developed? I'm often confused whether an action is skillful or unskillful for this being, with its limitations and conditions.

This is for me one of the tremendous blessings and gifts of the Buddhist teachings, because if we really were trying to sort all this out in our own minds—I mean, it's hard enough just being with five breaths—but trying to really sort out all of the different mental factors and how they work and how they relate to one another... When you become familiar in some depth with the Buddha's teachings, there's not even any one word to describe it. It's brilliant and profound and comprehensive. It's amazing. We've just

been given this gift as a framework for the investigation.

The Buddha laid this out pretty simply, and it's actually part of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Foundations of Mindfulness. One of the meanings of mindfulness, of the word *sati*—as we know, mostly it's translated as mindfulness, but the root meaning of the Pali word has to do with remembering. We could say, yes, it's remembering the present moment, but in the description of *sati*, it's also remembering what is skillful and what is unskillful. This is one of the applications in our practice of *sati*, of mindfulness.

So then how do we discern what's skillful and what's unskillful? The Buddha really simplified it for us. He said there are three wholesome and three unwholesome roots of all skillful and unskillful actions. Greed, hatred, and ignorance are unwholesome—they're unskillful mind states that lead to suffering. Non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or *mettā*, and non-delusion or wisdom are skillful, leading to peace and freedom. So that at least is a beginning way of discerning and assessing the thoughts we're having.

Related to thoughts, but with a slightly different nuance, is really becoming attuned to one's motivations, because we can see these wholesome and unwholesome roots in the motivations behind our actions. It may reveal itself in thought, but the motivation actually, in my experience, seems to come from someplace deeper than a thought. It takes a lot of honesty to really look carefully at one's motivations with discernment and to acknowledge: Is this just greed? Is it an unhealthy desire or clinging or grasping or attachment? Is this coming out of aversion or not wanting or fear or hatred? Is it coming out of confusion or ignorance? Or the opposite—is it motivated by generosity or love or wisdom?

Even just having that very simple framework can be a doorway to this wise discernment, where we're actually seeing what is wholesome and what is unwholesome.

There's a lot of subtlety involved in this, though. I'll give one example, because the Buddha had such a beautiful image. One time I was teaching a retreat at a Trappist monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. It was a very liberal abbot, and they invited me to come and teach meditation. Just before the retreat I was giving, there was some kind of seminar that was more psychologically based. One of the things that had come up in that previous seminar, in dealing with emotion, was the teaching to "honor your anger."

I thought, "Honor your anger?" From the perspective of the Buddhist teaching, I would tweak this a little. It's not so much that we should honor our anger, because anger is an unwholesome mind state. However, we can honor the fact that it's there. We're actually seeing it, taking responsibility for it. We're not pushing it away, not pretending that we're not angry. We're honoring the fact that it's there. But then we want to become mindful of it so as not to be caught by it.

However, we often are caught by it. And this is the image the Buddha used: anger with its poisoned source, anger with its poisoned root and honeyed tip. We're seduced by it very often. Anger is a powerful emotion.

It's like a lot of energy, and we often feel strong when anger is present. And sometimes the anger is telling

us something important. Sometimes there's a message in the fact that the anger is arising. Maybe something is really unjust or wrong and needs a response, and our first impulse might be anger. And then we can get caught up by it—"Yes, this is right"—the honeyed tip.

But we could take the message in terms of, "Okay, what's this situation and what needs to be done?" and not get caught in the energy, in the motivation of anger, which is an unwholesome mindset. But that's what I mean about discernment—sometimes we really have to look carefully to see what's what.

Another example of discerning what's wholesome and unwholesome, and I think this is just a super common experience: people very often conflate love and attachment. I've spoken with so many people over the years, and the common refrain is, "Of course if I love somebody I'm going to be attached." Because I think most people have not really looked carefully at these two mindsets, these two emotions. And so they become conflated—a wholesome mind state and an unwholesome mind state enmeshed with one another.

It becomes really interesting to investigate. When you're feeling love, what does that feel like? You're really bringing mindfulness to that emotion. When you're most loving, what's the energy? What's the feeling? In my experience, it's like a generosity of the heart. It's this openness. And what's attachment? It's this contraction. It's holding on.

Then you look at the consequences of the two. What are the consequences of the feeling of love? Usually it's something beautiful. What are the consequences of the feeling of attachment? Fear? Insecurity? Uncertainty? Isn't it strange that we just think they're inextricably woven together? But it's because we have not taken the time, in this very precise way, to discern what's skillful and what's unskillful. So this is a really important part of our practice.

Unless you were born a saint, most likely in our various responses to things—whether it's things within ourselves or to other people or situations—our motives will be mixed. It's very unlikely, again unless you happen to be a saint, that your motives are always one hundred percent pure.

I have so many examples of this. Just one story which some of you may have heard; I tell it over the years. I was on a self-retreat, reading some of the suttas, and I came across a story that I thought would make a great story for Sharon—Sharon Salzberg, my colleague and friend—who was writing a book. I thought, "Oh, that's going to be a great story for Sharon's book." And then the very next thought in my mind was, "No, I want to keep this story for myself." Because for a Dharma teacher, a good story is like gold. "I'm going to keep this to myself."

And then I thought, "No, that's clearly just unwholesome. It's just greed, attachment. Okay, I'll give her the story. But I'll tell her what I went through so she appreciates the fact that I gave her the story."

So my mind was just going back and forth like this, and at a certain point I asked myself, "Joseph, in all of this, where is the purity of motive here?" And I realized it was there in the very first moment—that very

first impulse.

This is to say that often we do have mixed motives, and many different kinds of thoughts arise. But if we have this quality of discernment and we're really watching our minds and our motivations, we can see clearly—and then not get judgmental about all the unwholesome thoughts, but simply return to that moment: "Oh yes, that was the wholesome impulse. Just give."

I tell this story because in this discernment, it's really important to be honest about the range of our own motivations. If we're not honest about it, we're not going to see it. And if we don't see it, we may very well be acting on the unwholesome motivations. Do you see how interesting all of this is? It's really quite illuminating of our lives.

A question came in that perhaps ties into this, about skillful mind states on retreat: "Could you please say a bit more about how to practice when the hindrances are absent? So far when it happens—not all that often—I note that they are absent, I enjoy it, and I try not to get attached. Wondering what you suggest."

Two things. First, I would be quite interested and mindful in not simply seeing the absence of the hindrances, but noticing what mind states are present in their absence. It might be calm. It might be concentration. It might be renunciation. In the absence of aversion or anger, there might be feelings of love or peace. Many positive mind states arise when the hindrances are absent.

Why is it important to recognize what these positive mind states are? Because they too are not to be clung to. The positive mind states, as well as the hindrances, call for mindfulness—mindful of peace, mindful of calm. We experience them, but without identifying with them, without holding on to them, without becoming attached. This is the role of mindfulness, but it helps to be very precise about the mind state, because it's easy to fall into simply thinking, "Oh, this feels good," and just hanging out and enjoying it. That's definitely more enjoyable than when the hindrances are present, but attachment to wholesome mind states is no less problematic than attachment to unwholesome ones. We want to develop this capacity. In an expansive sense, this is really the manifestation and development of equanimity. Pleasant, unpleasant—we're just seeing. The mind is non-reactive.

But let me show you how deeply conditioned our assessments of these different mind states can be. Suppose you're not on a silent retreat, but at home, sitting for an hour, and perhaps there were many hindrances or discomfort in the body. You get up and someone asks, "How was your sitting?" "Oh, a terrible sitting. My body hurt, my mind was restless." Or maybe you had a really peaceful sitting, and someone asks, "How was it?" "Oh, great sitting. The mind was calm, quiet."

No. That assessment is completely wrong, because it all depends on how mindful we were of whatever arose. If we had a peaceful sitting but were just immersed in it, attached to it, wanting it to continue, the assessment of that being a good sitting is incorrect. And if we were struggling with hindrances but actually being mindful of them, investigating them—that would be a good sitting, if we want to use such terms.

So again, mindfulness of the states present when the hindrances are absent is really important and often overlooked. We're so grateful to be free of the hindrances for a while that we think, "Let me just sit and enjoy this."

There's one very simple phrase in the suttas that comes up again and again, and it can be your reference point: the Buddha talks about liberation through non-clinging. That's really what you're practicing. There are many tools and techniques, but all of them are in the service of not clinging. It's good to remind yourself what you're actually doing here. It's not to have some special state or experience.

It's to not cling to whatever is arising.

So just to hammer the point home: there's another teaching of the Buddha which is really quite strong. He said that as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. That's a pretty high bar.

We can just watch, whether in our regular meditation or our daily lives—it's almost like we're hardwired. Of course I want what's pleasant, and of course I don't want what's unpleasant. It's so deeply conditioned, and that's why it takes a special circumstance, like a retreat, where you can devote yourself to this much more subtle understanding of what's arising. And we do get moments, sometimes more than moments, when the mind is really equanimous. Pleasant, unpleasant—the mind is non-reactive.

A little mantra that has helped me a lot, because this takes practice, because there's deep conditioning in us: "It's okay to feel the unpleasantness. It's okay to feel it." All the conditioning in our mind says it's not okay. We don't like it. We want to get rid of it. So just as a counterpoint to that habit of mind, it reminds us: if there's pain in the body, can I settle into it? Can I relax into it? Can I just explore what that experience is like? And the same thing with the pleasant—to be able to be with it without the attachment or the wanting it to continue. Then we really get into the profound depths of the practice.

So it's not an insignificant thing that you're doing here. It's really addressing some of our deepest conditioning and the cause of so much suffering in our lives. Because if we're attached to the pleasant and averse to the unpleasant, we live very defensive lives. We're always trying to protect ourselves. We have a little bit of pleasantness and think, "Let me just hold on to that and keep everything unpleasant away." It's not a very fulfilling way to live. But it's challenging. And that's why it takes practice.

Maybe that folds into a couple of questions around the theme of maintaining momentum. One asks: "Have you experienced a steady stream of insight in your fifty years of practice, or have there been dry spells without insight? Can you share some recent insights?" And the other: "How have you maintained resolve on long retreats? How have you addressed doubt about the effectiveness of practice, especially when it seems so convincing?"

I'll start with that last one, because doubt, of all the hindrances, is the most problematic. With all the others, the mind's in the ballpark with whatever the object is. We may be relating to the experience

through the filter of desire or aversion, or the mind's restless and running around. But at least we're in the arena with what's happening. With doubt, we're not even in the arena anymore. We've removed ourselves from the playing field. That's why it's really obstructive. Doubt can really hold back one's practice if we don't learn how to work with it—and we can learn to work with it.

The reason doubt is so seductive, and it can be really seductive, is because it comes in this very wise-sounding voice. This voice in the mind says, "Oh, the practice isn't going well, so maybe I should take a little rest." Or, "These teachers—what do they know?" Or, "This practice, I've been doing it and doing it and I don't seem to be getting anyplace." It's just this wise-sounding voice that seduces us, and we're not recognizing it as doubt.

The miracle cure for doubt is recognizing it when it arrives. "Oh, that's just doubt. That's the doubting mind." In that moment, we're no longer identified with that wise-sounding voice. It's no longer fooling us, and we're seeing it for what it is.

So that's just a preface to the other parts of the question, but I wanted to emphasize it because you do want to keep an eye out. Each one of us may have very specific kinds of doubts. It may be doubt about the practice. It may be doubt about your own ability to do the practice. It would be really helpful, if doubt is one of the hindrances that comes up for you from time to time, to get really precise about the particular doubt that is seductive for you. Become very familiar with it, because then when it arises—oh, there you are. There's doubt. It's really helpful to work with that as a hindrance. And it's very workable once it's clearly seen.

One of the biggest illusions as people begin their practice—and I think you have seen through this by now—is the idea that it's just going to get better and better and better until we're fully enlightened. Sorry, folks. There are just endless ups and downs and ups and downs and flat periods. We're practicing and we think nothing is going on. This is normal. This is how it unfolds.

What we learn over time, and you probably have some inkling of this already, is that even with all the ups and downs, the slope of the curve is going up. From sitting to sitting, or day to day, sometimes the mind is concentrated and clear and we feel great. Other times it may feel like we've never practiced before. And then the next day or the next sitting, the mind is quite mindful again. After going through these cycles enough times, after many days or years of practice, even though there are still ups and downs, we realize we're in a very different place. The ups and downs are happening on a different level.

One of the things that comes from many years of practice is that we become much more equanimous about all of this. I remember in the early years of my practice, I'd get very upset when things would be going well and then crash—it felt like everything was impossible. I'd get really upset and think, what am I doing wrong? But after experiencing it for years, there's now just a real equanimity. This sitting feels like I never sat before. But I know the next sitting or the next couple of sittings, it's going to pick up again. If you have that understanding that this is the natural course of practice, then you don't get upset by the

inevitable ups and downs.

The plateaus can be the most challenging, in a way, because at least with the ups and downs, we're seeing things changing constantly. But I've gone through periods where it just felt like nothing was happening—for days. It wasn't just a sitting or two. It was days and days of just nothing going on. At first, especially the first times I experienced those plateaus, it was really difficult. It was discouraging, full of self-judgment.

But I remember one particular time when I was practicing in India. I was up in the mountains during the summer months, doing a self-retreat and going through one of these dry spells. At a certain point, I gave myself a talking to. I said, Joseph, just sit and walk. Just sit and walk. That's your job. Let the Dharma take care of the rest. It was a kind of surrender to the Dharma. I was going to do my part, and I could sit and I could walk regardless of what was happening. I could just keep going. That simple reframing was tremendously helpful. I just kept sitting and walking, sitting and walking.

I don't remember how long it took, but at a certain point, the energy built up and the momentum built up again, and I came out of the doldrums. This can happen more than once. It's good to recognize that this is part of the path as well. It doesn't have to be a source of doubt or discouragement. It's just part of how things unfold. And there's a way to persevere through it.

And it takes perseverance. This is not an easy thing we're all doing. The Buddha likened it to swimming upstream. We're swimming against not only the current of our own conditioning, which is all very strong, but also against the current of the whole conditioning of our culture. There are so many messages from our culture—"Don't let desire pass you by," "I let nothing stand in the way of my pleasure." The advertisements are full of this kind of messaging. So we're doing something quite opposite to all that. Of course there are going to be challenges at different times. We're going to come up against different patterns within ourselves. But the beauty is that there's a very clear path and a very clear methodology. If we just keep going, the path unfolds.

So we're coming towards the end. Maybe we can finish with a couple of questions about death. This person writes, "We are about the same age, and I'm thinking more and more about death. How has death's closer proximity affected you and your Dharma practice?" And then a second question: "In learning to live well, it seems like we're learning to die well. Is the deepest crux of this practice to, at our time of death, be able to let go enough so that we won't be born again into this world of suffering?" That sums it up pretty well.

So, first to say that my experience in this aging process—the reality of it has definitely taken on a different vividness. This is just a little personal anecdote. Years ago, my mother was still alive, but she was in her late eighties. And of course, my whole life has been talking about this stuff. So she would be talking about her experience and I would be acknowledging and commiserating and saying that I understand. She would just shake her head and say, "You have no idea." I didn't really appreciate what she meant at the

time, but now I do. Because even though we can feel it deeply at any age, and we can really open to the truth of impermanence, at least in my experience, and I think with many others, when we reach a certain age we know it's not going to be that much longer. It really does take on a certain immediacy. For me it has inspired strong motivation to do more practice. For many years in my younger years, I would always do a self-retreat of a month a year—I just built that in. Then in middle age, I thought I would do two months a year. Now in my elderly years, I'm going to do three months a year, because it just feels like the most important thing to do. There is an effect, I think, as we're living into this experience.

But there's another frame that I use for myself and have talked about with other people, which I've found really helpful: we're not dead until we're dead. So in one way, it's all the same. We're in this life process, and of course what we're experiencing may change, but it's the same mind-body process going on until we're dead. Everything we're doing in our practice, in our moment-to-moment experience, is precisely what we want to be happening in the process of dying and the moment of death—to be mindful and not clinging. Everything that you're practicing now is the practice for dying. And that's true up until the last moment. This gives me a lot of energy and inspiration for the practice, to realize that not only is it making our lives freer now in the moment, but it's also the most significant preparation for the dying process. Basically, we just want to stay mindful in the moment of what's happening.

In this stage of life, thoughts of death and dying may come more frequently. For some people, those thoughts can come even quite young.

It just depends on one's particular conditioning. It's really helpful not to get lost in the story our mind is telling us.

There's a Zen story which relates to this. There was a Zen monk living up in the mountains in some cave. He was a great artist, and for whatever reason, he devoted his time to painting this very intricate painting of a tiger. It took him years, and it was just so realistic. After it was all done, as the story goes, he looked at it and became frightened.

One might think, well, that's pretty silly. Yet we are doing the same thing with our thoughts and our fears. All the thoughts we have about dying are painted tigers, because we're actually still alive, still in the moment. We can relate to this moment's experience and even relate to those thoughts, but seeing them as thoughts in the moment—not being pulled into the fearful story or the anxiety story or whatever it may be. That story is a painted tiger.

If we can see that, then even if such thoughts come up—and they might, for different people have different relationships to the idea of dying—it's really helpful to see that they are just thoughts in the moment. And thoughts in the moment are very workable. But if we take them to be the real tiger, if we start believing or getting lost in the content, the storyline, then it's going to be a source of distress and unease.

This whole opening to the truth—the Buddha emphasized this so often. I'll close with this reflection that he offered. This was so important to him that he suggested it be reflected on daily. And I find it so helpful just in the midst of my daily life.

He said: "What has the nature to grow old will grow old. What has the nature to become ill will become ill. What has the nature to die will die. And I am not exempt."

That's the kicker. Because even though intellectually we all know this—it's not some esoteric truth—what has the nature to grow old is going to grow old and grow ill and die. This is the nature of things. This is what's going to happen. But I see it in myself, and I think it's not uncommon: until we're really hit in the face with it, there's this underlying feeling that we are exempt. Or that if we're not exempt, we should be exempt.

I've seen this in myself—as if these things happening are a mistake, as if somehow I had done something differently, they wouldn't happen. That's why the Buddha said this should be a daily reflection. And it really helps me. If I'm going through the day and I don't feel well, or something hurts, and I begin wondering, "Why did that happen?"—I am not exempt. And it's freeing. It just allows me to relax. Yes, this is just the nature of things. It's really quite opening and supportive of greater ease.

After some practice, you don't even have to do the whole reflection. You could just say: I am not exempt. That sums it up.

So we are not exempt together. And this whole path—I really got inspired just when I walked in here. I saw the whole field with all of you. It's an amazing thing that you're all doing. Having done so many retreats myself, I know it's really rare in this world. And it's essential. It's essential for our own happiness, and it's essential for beginning to share that happiness and peace with everyone else.

It's inspiring, and it's really important.

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