What Is Mindfulness?

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:03:06

It's quite amazing to come into the hall and see a hundred people sitting in silence. Not a very usual occurrence in our world.

Given the explosion of interest in mindfulness in these last five to ten years, I thought it might be helpful to explore some of the nuances of what mindfulness is and what it isn't, and how mindfulness is really the fundamental methodology of inquiry. It's the fundamental methodology the Buddha proposed on our path of awakening.

The teachings of mindfulness have their root in the teachings of the Buddha. As was mentioned last night, there is one very well-known discourse, the Satipatthana Sutta, The Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It's pretty remarkable to think that a discourse the Buddha gave over 2600 years ago still has such relevance and power and appropriateness for our lives today. So clearly there's something very essential and very powerful about these teachings.

When I was working on my last book, *Mindfulness*, somebody asked me—I was in the staff dining room here—if I could describe the meaning of mindfulness in just a few words. I thought, well, it's a bit like asking, what is art? Please explain art in a few words. Or what is love? It's not so easy to encapsulate very briefly.

One of the most common descriptions of mindfulness, something you're probably all familiar with, is that being mindful means living in the moment, living in the present—not being continually lost in thoughts of past and future, but actually being here. That's a pretty good starting place. In order to be mindful, we need to be present.

But simply living in the present is not enough. That by itself is not mindfulness.

I've been using an example I call "black lab consciousness." Are you familiar with the Labrador Retrievers, the Black Labradors? They're very friendly, playful dogs, really delightful. When you're playing with them and watching them, they're running around smelling and sniffing and looking, going here and there. They're clearly in the present moment. They're not thinking about the future, they're not thinking about the past—they are engaged in the present. But they don't look very mindful. That may be a projection, a human viewpoint, but I don't really see any evidence of mindfulness there. You can be in the present and fully engaged, but mindfulness means something else is needed.

It's helpful to understand what else is needed in order to be mindful, besides simply being in the present. The importance of this is expressed by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who said, "Live, you say, in

the present. Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality."

This is a very profound understanding, because we can be in the present but relate to it in either a superficial way or a very conceptual way. It's not just being in the present that we want—we want reality. We want the connection with what is true.

So then the question becomes: what will take us beyond black lab consciousness? How do we move up the evolutionary scale? What quality of mind do we need to add that will actually lead us to awakening?

An added element, which is a part of mindfulness, could be called the observing power of the mind. The implication of this is that as we're observing different phenomena, we know that we're knowing. A black lab is running around knowing sights and sounds and smells. It's not unconscious—it's aware of all these things. But as far as we can tell, there's no meta quality to it. It doesn't look like the black lab knows that it's knowing.

When we add the observing power to living in the present—whether we're observing the breath or the body or thoughts or sounds or sights—we're connecting in the present, and we know that we're knowing. This is another dimension to our awareness, to our consciousness, that begins to clarify the meaning of mindfulness.

A very clear way to notice and understand this difference between what I'm calling black lab consciousness—the simple being-present awareness—and the observing power of mind when we know that we're knowing, is to watch the mind and the thoughts arising in it. Begin to see and investigate very clearly for yourselves the difference in your experience between when you have been lost in a thought versus when you're aware of thinking. Has anybody had that experience of being lost in thought? Not uncommon.

Notice what it is like, what the experience is like of being lost in a thought, contrasted with the experience of that moment when we wake up from being lost. The moment of recognizing, "Oh, thinking." Right there. That is a very powerful moment. And it happens endless times a day, so you have many opportunities to really see and explore what the difference in your experience is.

Very often in practice, people will be doing their practice in whatever way—being with the breath, the body, different phenomena—and the mind will get lost in a thought. When people wake up from being lost, they just hurry back to some object, the breath or the body, whatever it is. But if we do that, we're missing the opportunity to really deeply, intimately experience the difference between being lost and being awake.

So I wouldn't rush back. I would take just a few moments—really, but in every moment that you wake up from being lost, which will happen many, many times—highlight that moment and really say, "Oh, this is what wakefulness is. This is what awareness is. In this moment, I'm not lost. I know that I'm knowing. I know that there's thinking." And just contrast it, even if it's a slight looking back retrospectively, contrast

that quality of mind with how it had been when you were lost. We just get a very clear sense of the difference. And it's really the difference between ignorance and wisdom, between delusion and wisdom. So it's a powerful moment. Don't overlook it.

And the good news is that for as many times in the day as you get lost, exactly that many times will you awaken, because nobody stays lost forever. We're lost in our thoughts and fantasies, whatever, and at a certain point we wake up. So you actually have many moments of awakening already during the day. It's just that those moments are often overlooked. My suggestion is don't overlook them. Really connect with that quality because it will illuminate the nature of the aware mind.

I find this particularly obvious, and in a way fascinating, when doing this exercise and paying attention in this way while walking or moving about. The contrast between the simplicity of just the awareness of some body movement—of taking a step—it's so simple and so basic, just taking a step, and it's so easy to be aware of that. And then as you're walking, the experience we've all had is the mind gets caught up in some mind-created world, and for however long—it can be a step or two steps or ten steps—we are lost in this world. We're lost in the movies of our mind. And then we wake up from that, back to another step.

Whenever I notice that, at a certain point it's amusing, because what just happened? Here I was just walking, walking, and all of a sudden I've created a whole mind world which I've inhabited, with all the attendant emotions associated with it. It's all self-created in our minds. And the contrast is just very obvious. Step, step, step, dream world of the mind. Step, step, step, another dream world. It reveals in a very clear and direct way how much of our day is spent dreaming, spent lost in these movies of our minds.

Here on retreat, when you really have nothing else to do—your only job is to pay attention, whatever you're doing—this gets very clear, and it's motivating, because we see how often the mind slips into that deluded state where we don't know what's going on. We're simply lost in the story.

This observing power of mindfulness, where we know that we're knowing, opens up many new areas of investigation and exploration. When we're grounded in this observing power of mind and not lost in the story, not simply running around like a black lab—we're present, we're in the present, but we know that we're knowing, we're aware of what's arising—we can begin to explore things in a whole different way, on a whole different level.

One of my favorite places of investigation revolves around a very simple question. If you hold this question in a meaningful way, it will change your life, hopefully for the better. The question is: What is a thought?

We have all these thoughts all day long going through, thoughts or pictures, images. Mostly we are obsessed with the content of the thought, with what the thought is saying, with the story of it. That's where we're involved and caught up, what we're reactive to or motivated by. It's all about the content of the thought. What I'm suggesting is not that.

I mean, that has its own value, to be aware of the content. But what I'm suggesting is something different. It's not what is the thought saying—it's asking the question in the time of thinking. So it's a direct exploration. It's not conceptual. When we're thinking, when thoughts are arising in the mind, we ask the question or hold the question: well, what is a thought? And then we're looking directly at it.

It's revelatory, because when we look at the nature of thought—not its story, not the content—when we look at the nature of thought, we see that as a phenomenon, it's little more than nothing. It's just like that. It's so ephemeral and so insubstantial.

And what is so amazing in our lives, through seeing this, is realizing that when we're unaware that we're thinking, thoughts have tremendous power in our lives. Thoughts are running our lives. Go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced, whatever. It's like we're the slaves of our thoughts. These are the little dictators of the mind. Thoughts have so much power in our lives when we're unaware of them. And when we are aware of thought as thought, we see that there's nothing much there.

This is tremendously liberating—we come out from the dominion of our thought conditioning. Do you see the potential here? It's so freeing.

And of course we get caught. This is a very long established pattern, being lost in our thoughts, not seeing them clearly. So it's not that by seeing this once, all of a sudden we're going to be free of being captivated by the thought process. But we see it once, we see it twice, we keep on looking in this way. And slowly our understanding is transformed, and thoughts no longer have the power that we have given them for so long.

In that situation, we're then free to choose which thoughts are helpful, which are skillful, which are going to be ennobling for us—and which thoughts are not, which thoughts are just the cause of suffering. And we're more easily able to let them go because we understand and know, not intellectually, we know because we've seen it ourselves, that thought as thought is really empty. There's not much there.

So this is just one small example with huge ramifications of the power of observation, of this kind of knowing. Hopefully you can begin to get a sense that this is not a trivial undertaking. We're really working at understanding ourselves and our minds and our hearts in a way that transforms how we live.

So we can say that being mindful includes being in the present. We definitely need that, but it's not enough. And mindfulness, being mindful, includes this quality, what I've been calling the observing power of the mind, where we know that we're knowing, we know what's arising—like a thought or anything else. It's that meta knowing. We know that we're knowing.

But even this—living in the present and this observing power of mind—is still not necessarily being mindful. I hope you see that mindfulness is not necessarily a simple thing. There are a lot of nuances to really understanding what makes it such a powerful quality of mind.

The reason that this observing power is also not enough to really be mindful is that very often we are in the present and we are observing what's happening, so we know that we're knowing, but we may be knowing through all kinds of mental filters. It's like we're wearing colored glasses and we're seeing whatever the object is through that particular filter. We might be experiencing or observing our experience through the filter of greed, of wanting. So we're in the present, and we know what the object is, and we're observing it—but there's also this wanting or greed in the mind. Or there might be aversion or resistance to what's there. Maybe it's unpleasant, and we're observing it but through the filter of aversion. Or through the filter of delusion, where we're kind of there but it's not really clear.

The Buddha gave a few very apt similes for these three filters. Sometimes when the Buddha uses examples or similes, I find that often I will read them and think, "Oh yes, that resonates." But I don't necessarily take the simile in and look to see how it describes my own experience. So what I suggest, as I read the similes for these three states—they're very apt—is that you really see how they are expressive in your own experience.

of these states, because then it helps us to recognize them more easily.

So this is the Buddha's description. He said: "There's no fire like lust, no grip like anger, no net like delusion." Three very simple images. The next time you happen to be consumed by or overwhelmed by lust, if you can remember this, really look to see—does this make sense? Is this like a fire in the mind? And my experience over many years of watching that and many other similar mind states confirms that it is like a fire, like a burning. Or the grip of anger—when there's strong anger in the mind, doesn't it feel like we are gripped? Or the net, everything covered by a net of delusion.

The problem is, as we try to move to this more refined understanding of mindfulness—which is the observing power of mind free of greed, hatred, and delusion—that really gets to the heart of the quality and the purity of mindfulness. We're with experience, observing experience without those particular filters. The difficulty is that these filters of greed and hatred and delusion, which the Buddha called the three unwholesome roots, are the qualities in the mind out of which all other unwholesome mind states arise. They're the fundamental qualities. And the challenge with this greed, aversion, or delusion is that they're so deeply conditioned, and for so long, that they're often unconscious. We don't even know that they're there.

I'll give you an example. This is just one example of countless ones, but it has stuck in my mind. It was an experience I had in Burma when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. I had been there for a month or so and my practice was deepening. I was just with the flow of changing experience. My body was getting more open, with an easier flow of energy sensations. But there was this one knot right in my neck. So I'd be just being mindful of all this, and then my mind would go to that sensation and be with it as best I could.

Then when I went to report on my experience to Sayadaw U Pandita, he said, "You know, it all seems to be

going well—the body's open, the flow of sensations—but there's this one block, this energy block." And he got on my case for calling it a block. Because I thought I was describing it objectively. Okay, there's this energy flow, so there's an energy block. But just in the use of that term, I was loading the experience with aversion. Block—get rid of it. Block—open it. Block—do something about it. Just in the word itself, and I had had no idea that I was relating to that experience with aversion. I thought I was just seeing it clearly. "Oh, this is a block." Do you see how subtle it can be? Just our interpretations of experience and the language we use to describe what's happening—we need to be very watchful. Do the words themselves convey wanting or aversion or delusion?

So here's another way of tuning in to whether these filters are present or not. This description is from a contemporary teacher—I can't remember who described it this way, but I thought it was quite vivid. They said: greed in the mind is pulling in; we want. Aversion in the mind is pushing away; we don't want. Delusion in the mind is running around in circles.

So if the terms greed and aversion and delusion are somehow too abstract in terms of noticing whether they're present or not, you might try these terms instead. Is there a pulling into experience? Is there a pushing away? Are we just going around really not knowing what's happening? Those are the manifestations of greed, hatred, and delusion: pulling in, pushing away, running around in circles.

According to some schools of Buddhist psychology, and very much part of this particular tradition, mindfulness as a quality of mind is considered to be always wholesome. So if mindfulness is present, that means the mind is in a wholesome state. Even if we're being mindful of aversion or greed or wanting, it's actually very interesting to observe—and this is getting into a little more refinement, which, as the retreat goes on, you may be able to tune into.

In the moment of being mindful of anger, we're not angry. There's been that moment of disidentification with the anger which makes the mindfulness possible. This shows what you might call the purifying power of mindfulness. It doesn't exclude all these other states from being in the field of our awareness, but mindfulness changes our relationship to those states. And that's really what's freeing.

So mindfulness—now we're coming down to the fullness of its definition—is being in the present. It is this observing power of mind that knows that it's knowing, whatever the object is. And we're observing it or being with it without greed, without pulling in, without aversion, without pushing away, without delusion, without just running around in circles.

I want to give two examples of this. For those of you who have sat many retreats, these stories will be very familiar because I've been talking about them for the last thirty years. But somehow they seem as apt today as they did thirty years ago. I think they highlight just what I'm talking about.

As many of you know, one of the major afflictive emotions or defilements that I have seen in my mind over many years—I would say the predominant negative emotion—has been fear. At times very strong,

particularly earlier on in my practice. It wasn't fear about anything in particular. It was just a conditioned energy, and sometimes it was completely irrational. There were times when it was so intense that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It doesn't make any sense. It's not rational. But that energy, for whatever reason, was hugely strong.

So I was working with it a lot—fear, fear, fear, fear, fear. In working with fear, it highlighted a very important distinction, one that is often missed. There's a lot of confusion between these two aspects: the distinction between recognition and mindfulness. Very often we think that if we recognize what's there, we are being mindful. But recognition by itself doesn't take into account the filters through which we're looking.

All that time I was noting fear, fear, fear, fear, it was always with the energy of wanting it to go away. But because I was recognizing it, I thought I was being mindful. This went on for years. It was a strong pattern—not continuous, of course, but it would come up very often.

Then finally, I was doing walking meditation just outside in the spring, and something shifted. All of a sudden something shifted, and the shift was expressed in the thought: if this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay. "It's okay" became a magic mantra for me, because that phrase represented the shift from seeing the fear through the filter of aversion and wanting to push it away to seeing the fear with acceptance. That was really the first moment of mindfulness. In all those years of practice.

Do you see the difference between recognition and mindfulness, and how we can recognize something but it's not necessarily yet being mindful? We have to look at what filters are in the mind.

I want to read another example, and again many of you will be familiar with this, but it's one of my very favorite examples of an extraordinary mind of mindfulness and equanimity in the face of a major challenge. It's a story I read about the death of Henry David Thoreau, who died quite young. He was forty-four and he died of tuberculosis, a very challenging illness. What was written was by a friend of his:

"Henry was never affected, never reached by his illness. Very often I've heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever. He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health—the mind always conforming to the condition of the body. The thought of death, he said, could not begin to trouble him."

That line: "There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health. The mind always conforming to the condition of the body." Isn't that quite amazing? Somebody who's basically dying of a severe, painful illness—

But with the mind that is mindful, that is aware of what's arising without pulling in or pushing away or delusion, the awareness, you could say, conforms to or simply embraces or opens to whatever the condition is. It's often, or certainly in this situation, it may be unpleasant, but with mindfulness, unpleasant experience does not condition aversion. With mindfulness. Mostly it does. Our conditioning is

that when something is painful, we don't like it, we want to push it away.

So mindfulness is radical. Mindfulness is saying there's another whole way of being with some of the most challenging times of our lives, including the dying process. Can we be mindful in the way that Thoreau was? It's pretty remarkable.

So this is what we're practicing, being on retreat in somewhat less trying circumstances than Thoreau was in at that time. But you'll have plenty of opportunities to observe the mind feeling pain, feeling discomfort, whether it's in the body or the mind. Check. Really ask yourself, am I being mindful of this—which implies that openness, that spaciousness, that acceptance—or because it's unpleasant, am I pushing it away? And this will take practice. It takes a lot of practice. But can you get a sense of the potential for freedom here? When our mind does, at least to some extent, even if it's not perfect, but at least to some extent can open to and accept, be mindful of whatever's arising, pleasant or unpleasant—tremendous, tremendous freedom.

So just the last little piece on Thoreau. Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves. When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, aunt." That's a wonderful mind.

One indication that we're in that space of recognition without mindfulness—when we know, we recognize what's there, but we're not being mindful—one indication of that is a sense of struggle. If you're sitting or walking or going through the day, I'm sure you're familiar with the feeling of just things not feeling quite right, a feeling that there's struggling going on of some kind, whether minimal or some big struggle.

Usually we just get caught up in the struggle and then maybe self-judgment about it—"I'm not doing this right" or "it's not working," whatever. Instead, you can take those times of struggle, whenever they arise, as feedback. Struggle actually is a very useful message to us. It's really like a mindfulness bell because it's a very obvious experience.

When we are in a struggle and we see it as feedback rather than simply being lost in the difficulty of it, what does struggle mean? It only means one thing. It means something is arising that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. It's very simple. If you're feeling discomfort in the body and just struggling, take that as a signal: "Oh, this means that the mind is pushing away, that it's not accepting the experience of this unpleasantness." So it's waking us up.

Another example of this, which again can happen very often in practice for many people: there will be many times when your mind does not feel very concentrated. Maybe a lot of thoughts, just a run of thoughts. Maybe you're getting lost a lot. And I know from my own experience that when this happens, there's often a feeling of frustration, of disappointment, of self-judgment, of evaluation of my practice, all of that—"This is terrible, it's not working, I'm just lost in thought all the time."

In that sense of struggle, at one point I saw the struggle, the energetic struggle, and realized what's happening is that I am not accepting the fact that the mind is thinking. I didn't like the fact that it was

thinking so much. As soon as I saw that, it was like, "Oh, thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking." That's what was happening. When I stopped fighting with it or judging it or struggling with it, then the thoughts ran their course and the mind settled back down again. Practice went on.

So what was the difference? A very simple move from resistance or not liking to acceptance—to say, "Yes, this is what's happening now. Lots of thinking." Do you see how simple this can be? My first teacher, Munindraji, had a very good phrase for practice. He said, "It's simple but not easy." It's not easy because of the depth and power of our conditioning, but it's not complicated.

It's really very simple. And so that's why we simply practice. And as we practice, it gets easier.

So the question, one of the questions for us, is how do we move from black lab consciousness to the observing power of the mind to mindfulness? How is that move accomplished?

There are a few very simple techniques which you can play with, experiment with, see which are useful for you in this trajectory. One tool that many people find helpful is the tool or the technique of mental noting, where we're with our experience and we're just putting a very soft mental label on what's happening. So, for example, you might be sitting and noting "in, out, in, out" with the breath. "Hearing, hearing, thinking, in, out. Pain, tightness, in, out." Just like that. Moment after moment, we're just putting a very soft mental note on the experience.

This helps to focus the attention, to bring some clarity to what it is that we're observing. It's a check on whether we're actually connecting with the object or not. And it also serves another purpose because the tone of the note will very often reveal the quality of the observing mind. Even if we may miss those filters of aversion or wanting, because they may be too subtle for us to pick up, the tone of the mental note in our minds is more obvious.

So if you're sitting and noting, "thinking, thinking, thinking, THINKING" — okay, that's a little sign. That is not exactly acceptance. And what's so amazing, and this is really quite an interesting aspect of the practice that would be fun for you to play with, is to see how by simply changing the tone of voice in the note, it changes our mind state. It's a very simple and effective way to move from resistance or aversion or greed to mindfulness. So instead of "thinking, thinking, THINKING," we change the tone: "thinking... thinking... thinking." Just there, just in that moment, the mind settles back into openness, into receptivity.

This tool of noting can be used very effectively for continuity of mindfulness, for really seeing what the various attitudes in the mind are. I would encourage all of you to at least experiment with this. Some meditators find this technique of noting super helpful and can do it all day. They just spend the whole day, moment after moment, noting what's arising very softly, very easily. For other people, that may seem too daunting or it doesn't so much resonate as a continuous practice. But I would really encourage you to at least play with it for periods of time so that it becomes a tool in your toolbox. It doesn't mean that you have to use it all the time, but there will be times in your practice where this tool of noting is hugely

helpful.

When you're caught up in some big storm and it's very hard to find some stability or balance in the midst of it, the tool of noting can be a huge stabilizer. Even if you were just noting "storm... storm... storm." In every moment of that note, the mind is being mindful. It's in balance. So again, I would just encourage you to experiment with it as much or as little as you like, but become familiar with the potential of it. And then you can use it as needed.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who has taught in this country in these last few years, takes an approach that is very open and spacious and doesn't particularly use things like noting or even necessarily using the breath as an anchor. What he emphasizes, and which can be incorporated into the practice we're doing, is something he suggests doing very often. He says, "Check the attitude in the mind."

This speaks to that point of noticing the filters. What I call filters, he's calling attitudes. Is there the attitude of wanting or resistance, pushing away, or fear, or whatever it may be? So when he says "check the attitude," it's really reminding us that even as we're connecting with different elements of experience like the breath or sensations or sounds, that by itself is not enough. We need to check to see if we're experiencing those things through a filter or not. When he says "check the attitude," that's just a way of looking into the mind and seeing, okay, is there something else here?

I'll give you an example of how I used this, and it was quite startling to me. I had heard this instruction from him, and I was actually in the hall here, just sitting, just feeling my breath. It was just in, out, in, out. Very simple, I was just feeling my breath. And then I remembered, came to my side, the instruction: check the attitude. So then I looked — oh, what's the attitude here?

Much to my surprise, when I did that... actually, what happened was so interesting. Just by having that thought come to mind — oh, check the attitude — just in the moment of having that thought, I could feel the mind settle back from a leaning forward, mentally and energetically, that I didn't even know was going on.

I thought I was just with the breath. It was so simple, and I've done it for forty-five years. But—oh, check the attitude.

And in that moment of settling back, which happened by itself, I realized that even as I was watching the breath in this very simple way, there was a subtle wanting. It was like an "in-order-to" mind. I'm with the breath in order to become concentrated, in order to settle, in order to accomplish something or get something. That "in order to" is just another aspect of the wanting mind.

And in that simple statement—check the attitude—and settling back, that fell away, and I saw what mindfulness really was. Just feeling the breath, the sensation of the breath exactly as it presented itself, without wanting, without leaning into, without expectation, without "in order to."

So there's one principle of meditation that, if you really take in and embody, will save you endless amounts of suffering. Ready?

In the meditation practice, what's important is not what it is that's arising. What's important is how we're relating to it.

We're not practicing to have particular experiences in vipassana practice, in insight practice. We're practicing a certain relationship to what's arising. That's what we want to really be paying attention to. And this is everything I've been talking about. Mindfulness means relating to experience without those filters of wanting or expectation or resistance or aversion.

So this is our practice. You're not sitting and thinking, "Oh, if only my mind would become like this or that, or have this experience." Can we just settle back in a really relaxed way? The body breathes by itself; you don't have to make any effort to breathe. Just sit back and let the body breathe. And check the attitude. Are you there in the simplicity of it, or is there "I'm doing this in order for something to happen"? Or we're feeling some discomfort in the body. Can we be light with it? You know, as much perfect comfort as perfect disease and perfect health. Or is there resistance to discomfort? The discomfort's not the problem. It's all how we're relating to what's arising.

Is this clear? This is a fundamental principle of meditation, and one that people hear very often and just as often forget. Because the energy of our consumer culture has infiltrated into how we do the practice, in terms of wanting and getting. And this is about something else entirely. This is about freedom.

I'll give another example of the liberating power of mindfulness. It works in so many interesting ways, and sometimes it's so simple, what will unhook us from suffering.

One of the common tendencies in the mind, which I'm sure you've noticed, is just the tendency to judge and have comments about everything. I saw this in particular—I've been on retreat many times here—and I noticed that every time I went into the dining room at mealtime, my mind had a comment about everyone. What they were wearing, how much food they took, how mindful I thought they were being—just everybody that came into my view. It was ridiculous. Totally ridiculous. And yet this is what the mind was doing.

After being caught in it for a long time—this pattern was very strong—I just began to investigate: well, what is going on here? And then at a certain point, I connected with the basic teaching of the Buddha, which I had not applied in this situation.

I just started noting "seeing." As soon as I would walk into the dining room, from the very first step in, that's all I would note. Seeing, seeing, seeing. I'd get my food—seeing, seeing. Sit down at the table—seeing. When I became mindful of the fact that I was seeing, the judgments completely disappeared.

All of those judgments and comments were fueled, came into being, or were encouraged by unmindful

seeing. My eyes would land on somebody, and I wasn't mindful that I was seeing, and then the whole proliferation of thought and judgment and concept would arise. All because I wasn't noting—oh, seeing, seeing.

It was that simple.

As soon as I brought it back to the level of bare attention, of just the bare sense impression and having mindfulness right there at the point of contact, all that mental proliferation fell away.

So again, it's not that it took any great effort. It just took understanding. It took a little bit of investigation. What's the cause of all these judgments? Oh, it's because I'm seeing and not being mindful. I hope you get a sense that this is a very powerful cutting-through quality of mind. All of the stories and difficulties and dramas that we get caught up in—there is a way through it all. There is really a way to find freedom in the midst of it.

I'm about halfway through the material, but I'm going to spare you, because one of my conditionings comes from my teachers. My first teacher, Munindraji—this was in my first years of practice in India—we were sitting on the open roof of the Burmese Vihara in Bodh Gaya, which at that time had very few Westerners. Back in the late sixties, maybe there were six or seven of us practicing with him there. He gave a three-hour talk on the twenty-one kinds of silence. Even now it would be a huge challenge, but then I was a beginning yogi. After an hour, an hour and a half, I really wanted to throw him off the roof. Okay, enough already. So I'm very sensitive to dharma talks and time. We'll continue the rest of this in the days to come.

I'll end with a teaching by the Tibetan master Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, because it captures what is so important for us as we enter into retreat and engage with the practice. He said:

"The potential for realization, for freedom, is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself."

The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you." This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you.

This is, for me, the great inspiring message of the teachings. It's not about belief and it's not about blind faith. It's about each one of us walking on this journey of understanding. And there is a way to do it. There is a methodology that has been practiced for thousands of years. That can be the feeling—and even at times the joy—you bring into the practice as you walk on the path.

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