Mindfulness: The Methodology of Wisdom

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:04:39

The other night I was speaking about what mindfulness is and what it isn't, starting with the understanding that simply being in the present or living in the present is necessary, but it's not sufficient. If you remember the example of the black labs, who are in the present but don't look very mindful. We then discussed the difference between recognition and mindfulness—how we can recognize something that's present, but it's not necessarily mindfulness if we're observing the experience through a filter of wanting or not wanting, aversion, or delusion. Mindfulness is that particular kind of being with experience with a mind that's not colored by greed or wanting, not colored by aversion, not colored by delusion. We begin to get a sense of the clarity and the power of mindfulness.

As our understanding of what mindfulness is deepens, and our experience of it deepens, we can begin to see that it's a methodology for answering some of life's very basic questions. One of them being: How can I be happy? This is something that all beings are in search of.

As was often the case, John Lennon had some good words about this. He said, "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life." So he had something going even at five.

Another way of expressing this question—and I think this is really essential, a question that sometimes or often is not asked—is: What do I learn from being mindful? We give so much emphasis to understanding what mindfulness is, to the practice of it, to doing it, but mindfulness itself is not an end in itself. Mindfulness is a way, a methodology, for the development of wisdom. So the question that we really have to examine in our practice and in our lives is: I'm doing all this practice, I'm putting so much energy into the cultivation and development of this quality—what actually am I learning from it?

That's what I'd like to explore tonight: what we learn, or can learn, from being mindful.

One of the first things that hopefully becomes apparent as we learn to pay attention in this particular way is that what we do matters. Our actions, whether of the body, of speech, or of mind, have consequences; our actions bring about results. In classical Buddhist terms this is expressed as the law of karma. But we don't need some esoteric teaching about this. We can see very directly when we're being mindful that our actions—whether of body, speech, or mind—have consequences for us. Some kinds of actions lead to happiness. Some kinds of actions lead to suffering.

If we look even further, following the Buddha's guidance, we can see that what most determines the

quality of the outcome is the motivation behind the action. Motivation becomes really important. It's easy to hear this as Buddhist philosophy, and it's interesting on that level, but it's not transformative. It's transformative when we see it for ourselves in our own experience. That's why we need to be mindful of the various mind states that accompany our various actions.

There are some very simple areas or arenas of investigation. This is not necessarily a particularly esoteric inquiry. We can really examine this in some very simple, basic, everyday situations. I'll give a few examples of how we can examine this and see for ourselves not only that what we do matters, but what actions or what qualities lead to what results.

A very simple question: What does it feel like when you're being generous? And what does it feel like when you're being self-centered, holding on? This is something we can examine many, many times. It's not something mysterious. When we're feeling generous and acting on it, what's the quality of our mind?

It becomes interesting when we pay a little more attention to the qualities of mind involved. What I've found is really quite beautiful: two things are going on, among others, when we're being generous. The qualities of mind, of heart, that are present generally include a feeling of mettā—we're being generous because we're having loving, friendly feelings towards somebody. And what also becomes obvious in the very act of giving is renunciation. We're letting go of something in giving it to someone else. If we're paying attention, we can get an experiential hit of exactly what the feeling of mettā is because we're experiencing it. We can also begin to taste the pleasure of renunciation.

is generally not so obvious, especially in our society. Renunciation doesn't have great PR. People hear the word and just the word itself evokes something that's perhaps good for us but that we don't really like, because it has connotations of deprivation and lack.

But actually, when we're experiencing the quality of renunciation—and another phrase that might illustrate or point to its freeing aspect is to think of renunciation as non-addiction, not holding on, not being addicted to things—in an act of generosity, we're not addicted. We're offering, and in that very act we can experience the beauty of that letting go, the freedom, the spaciousness in it.

So we begin to see, just by paying attention: How do I feel? What's it like when I'm being generous? What's it like when I'm not, when I'm being self-centered? And it's really interesting—like mindfulness or concentration or loving-kindness, generosity itself is its own practice. It's a quality of mind that we can cultivate, that we can develop. And we're all at different places along that development. For some people it's very easy; it's well developed in them and it's effortless to be generous. For other people with different conditioning, for whatever reason, it may not come so easily. And so you really need to practice, start practicing in a very slow and gradual way.

I had some very early lessons in this. Looking back, this goes back to my early college years, before I knew anything about Buddhism or the teachings or mindfulness. I was in a situation—maybe a freshman in

college, living the poor student life. I had no extra money at all. But I had a friend come visit from Europe, and he really needed some money. I forget exactly the circumstance, but there was a real need. And so I thought, I think I had a few hundred dollars saved, and I thought, well, I'll just give it to him. He really needs it more than I do. And I did.

But in my mind at that time, because I still didn't really understand the whole dynamic and meaning of generosity, I remember wondering: Is this okay? Is it okay? I was just a young kid, and here I'm giving $300, which now doesn't seem like a huge amount, but at that time it felt like a lot. Is it okay to do this?

And it was striking, looking back, that this should even be a question in my mind. It made me realize that for many of us, we need to be told that it's okay. It's okay to be generous. And that it actually brings a lot of happiness.

Over the years I've worked with a practice about this that I have found just so rewarding. It's one of the practices I love the best. And it takes some care in doing it, which I'll mention. The practice is this: I've been doing it now for quite a few years—if I have the thought to give something, I make the practice to do it, not to second-guess myself. Sometimes it's just a little thing, maybe offering something or offering some time, a little gesture. Sometimes a thought comes and it's a big thing—something that maybe I'm attached to, or maybe it's quite a large gift. But if I have the thought, I do it.

And what's been amazing for me, having done this now for years: first, it's very spontaneous, because I'm not thinking about what I should give. No, I'm just going on in my life, but paying attention to those thoughts of generosity and not second-guessing myself. Not "I may need it later." Not "They don't really need it." Not "Maybe..." You know, all those doubting thoughts about whether we should be generous or not. So if I have the thought, for the most part—it's not perfect—but I try to just do it. And it's been wonderful.

But this is also a practice, and we're all in different places with it. So if there's some hesitation or wondering about our motivation—Am I doing it out of guilt? Am I really doing it, and is it too much for my means, so that if we do it we'll have regret? Is it an appropriate gift for the person?—all these questions could be entertained, especially at the beginning, as one is engaging or beginning to engage in this practice, until we really have felt out for ourselves the degree to which this practice can be skillful. So we start small.

You don't have to start with some huge thing.

The reason I'm emphasizing this so much now—and the Buddha emphasized it traditionally—is that he would begin all his teachings with a teaching on generosity because it is one of the most accessible avenues towards happiness. Again, we don't have to believe this. What I'm suggesting is that by being mindful of our own mind states, feelings, and emotions, and how they arise along with different actions we take, we see for ourselves that this is a source of happiness in our lives.

Thich Nhat Hanh had a wonderful little phrase. He's this Vietnamese mindfulness master and poet and writer and peace activist—quite an exceptional being. He said, "Happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it." We can, if we know the causes of happiness. And this is what the Buddha is pointing out. He's saying, if you want to be happy, why don't you try this? So generosity is one thing to try, and to be mindful of what's going on in us, in the other person, in what occurs as we are cultivating this very beautiful quality. But again, we have to start where we are and just be sensitive to how we're doing it for our own balance of mind.

Another very simple investigation: What does it feel like when we're being kind or unkind? Which do you think brings more happiness? Some of these things are so obvious. Sometimes I think of the Buddhist teaching—I could imagine the Buddha almost like he's teaching second graders. "Okay, be generous, be kind, don't kill." On one level it is that simple. But we're all kind of enmeshed in the patterns of our conditioning. We've all been conditioned and brought up and habituated in certain ways. So sometimes we need to relearn these very basic understandings and principles.

Kind or unkind? How does it feel when we're being inclusive with everyone, or exclusive, keeping people out? We can pay attention to that. Instead of just playing out the patterns, we really take a look: Is this a condition for happiness or not? And it's not theoretical. If in these moments of relating in these different ways we're being mindful, we can check it out for ourselves in terms of what's the effect on our hearts, what's the effect on our minds.

When we speak, is our speech bringing people together, uniting people, or is it dividing people? One of the most prevalent speech patterns in many people—and this is really common, probably common worldwide—is the tendency or the certain delight we can have in gossip, gossiping about other people. I've noticed both in my own speech in that regard and in listening to others that kind of speech very often has an underlying divisiveness. Talking about maybe somebody's faults or something—it's like trying to get people on our side as we're speaking of others. So what would it be like first to see that? This kind of speech is dividing rather than uniting. This kind of way of relating is excluding rather than including.

These are ordinary everyday experiences we have. Are we paying attention? Because it's only through attentiveness to our own experience that some of these patterns can actually be transformed.

I had an early lesson in this. I was in India practicing in Bodh Gaya, which is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. This was in the early years, probably the late sixties, and very few people were there. Now there are lots and lots of Westerners who go. Then, I don't know, there may have been twelve or fifteen of us at this place. In between the times of intensive retreat, we would be doing our own practice, and we each had a little hut around the garden wall. But sometimes we'd get together more socially when we weren't doing intensive practice.

One night, this one woman who was there said, as we were gathering, that she had written a song and had a guitar and wanted to sing it for us. She said, "I wrote a song about each of you." My mind just assumed,

without any reflection, that it would be like a humorous roast.

She would just pick out the quirky qualities of each person. It turns out that her song highlighted the good qualities in each person. And the unexpectedness of that has stayed with me all these years. It was so surprising that somebody would create something that illuminated all the good qualities in the people around her. It was really amazing—the feeling of metta and connectedness. It was such a beautiful evening.

So do you see how simple this is? This part of the practice is not complicated because it deals with bringing mindfulness into these very ordinary aspects of our experience. How we are with other people. How we are with our speech. But we're paying attention. We're watching our minds. What brings happiness? What brings peace? What doesn't?

What I hope you will take away from this retreat is the understanding that it's not enough to know all this conceptually or intellectually. We can know, "Oh yes, it's good to be generous and not to be stingy. It's good to be loving and not to be aversive." But knowing it conceptually or intellectually is very different from actually seeing directly, closely, and intimately the effect of these actions on our hearts and minds. It needs to become very experiential. We need to verify these understandings—these conceptual understandings—in our own experience as we go through life. And that's what really gives energy for the purification of the mind. That's what gives energy for transformation.

Mindfulness can also lead us to more subtle levels of what brings us happiness, of what we can learn from being mindful. What's so interesting is that before we actually engage in this investigation, we can be pretty confused about the causes of happiness. We often do things wanting happiness, and yet we're doing the very things that cause suffering. This understanding, it's said, is what motivated the Buddha after his enlightenment as he viewed the world. He saw all these beings who were seeking happiness, wanting happiness, desiring happiness, and doing the very things that resulted in suffering—because of delusion, because of confusion. And that's what motivated him, it's said, out of compassion, to share the teachings.

So what are some examples of this? We can learn about it if we're mindful—really mindful—of what it's like when the mind is filled with wanting and desire. Now, we've been taught by society that those qualities actually bring us happiness. There was a sign in a New York store window that I saw while just walking down the street. The sign said, "Don't let desire pass you by." And then another ad for something or other proclaimed, "Nothing stands in the way of my pleasure." We're bombarded with messages that desire is good and that fulfilling desire is going to bring you happiness. Our whole culture is being fed that message.

It takes some keen mindfulness not to just go along and be influenced by all of that messaging, but to actually look for ourselves. When we are feeling wanting or feeling desire, to actually be mindful: What does that feel like? What does it feel like when the mind is free of desire?

As a little experiment—and I really encourage you to do this because it's revelatory and very impactful—the next time there's desire in the mind, just keep an eye out for when one might arise. It can be a big desire or a small one, whatever. But just be watchful. There's a desire arising in the mind, wanting. Just sit with it and be mindful of what it feels like when we're filled with this wanting.

What's interesting is that the wanting is often there because we think it's going to bring us happiness, but we're not paying attention to how it actually makes us feel. So really be watchful. There's desire. You're not trying to get rid of it. You're just observing: What's the effect of wanting and desire in my experience? And then the desire, at some point, all by itself will go away. One of the great insights, if you get this—

You will have saved yourself a lifetime of suffering: that you don't have to fulfill desires for them to go away. We think, when desires are strong, that the only relief will come from actually fulfilling them. But desires are impermanent like everything else. They will go all by themselves.

So in this experiment, the next time you're feeling some desire or wanting for anything, notice what it feels like, hang out with it for as long as it's there, and then notice what it feels like when the desire goes. That's the key moment. My experience has been, and in talking with yogis over all these years, it's a common experience: desire, desire, desire, and then when it goes, it feels like we've been let out of the grip of something. The desire has held us in its grip, and there's a certain contraction and tension in that, even if we're associating it with some pleasant fulfillment. But the actual experience of wanting, and then it ends—all of a sudden, it's like the heart and the mind are released out of the grip and the seduction of wanting. We can feel this. This is not theoretical, because we're there in the experience, being mindful of it as it's happening. We actually experience the freedom or the release or the peace or the openness or the spaciousness of not wanting.

This is huge, because it can reorient our thinking about what's really important in our lives and what actually does bring happiness. I'm not suggesting that we should never act on our desires. It's not about that. We do act on them, and this is just part of living in the world. There's nothing wrong with the enjoyment of different pleasures—all of that's fine. But can we understand deeply what's really going on, so that we don't devote our life energy to the fulfillment of desire in the pursuit of happiness? Because it's not going to give us what we want. It's not going to bring that result. We need to see this. Again, you hear the words and you might agree or disagree, but I'm just inviting you to check it out.

This is a really important piece. When the Buddha laid out the Four Noble Truths, he talked about the truth of difficulty or the truth of suffering, and what the cause was on a fundamental level: craving. And that the end of that dukkha, that suffering or difficulty, is the end of craving.

One of the interesting things that happened in my practice over the years—in the early years, I used to practice with the idea that I understood the teachings of the Third Noble Truth, the end of suffering, the end of craving, and I would have the thought: well, maybe in twenty or thirty years, or five lifetimes, I'll come to the end of craving. I put it off as a far-off goal. And then at a certain point, I was on retreat and I

realized: I can practice the end of craving now, even if it's just for a few moments. I can pay attention to what it's like when there's wanting and then not wanting, and actually get a taste—a taste of that peace when we're let out of the grip of it. This is not something that needs to be postponed for full and complete enlightenment. We can have many moments of mini-enlightenment throughout the day.

In a similar way, in terms of using mindfulness to investigate what really are the causes of happiness in our lives, what we can learn from being mindful is to pay attention when we're feeling a lot of aversion or anger. What does it feel like? Just look at it as objectively as possible, so you're not involved in self-judgment or blame or anything—you're just investigating. Aversion is in the mind: anger, irritation, annoyance, all the forms of it. The mindfulness is just a way of understanding it in its own nature. Oh, anger feels like this. Irritation feels like this. We will have a very direct experience.

But what's so interesting is how seductive the feeling of anger is. It's a powerful energy, and often when we're feeling anger in different circumstances, we feel empowered because it's a powerful energy. Often we feel strong as we're in the midst of that emotion. But the Buddha uses one little example which, to my mind, just captures the subtleties and nuances of this feeling. He said, "Anger, with its poisoned source and honeyed tip." Anger with its poisoned source and honeyed tip, sweet tip. Yes, it's exactly like that. There is a sweetness. When we're really angry, there can be a delight—yes!—and we get seduced by the honeyed tip, not seeing the poisoned source.

What does that mean? It's a dramatic term, but it really refers to something as simple as paying attention to the effect of anger on our minds, so that we see the contraction and the aversion and the feeling of separation and the feeling of self-righteousness. Even though we may often justify the anger to ourselves—in this situation I should be angry—who is it that's suffering? We are the ones who are suffering. But often we're not really being mindful, so we're not really seeing it or feeling it, the suffering of it.

Having said all that, it's also important to realize that at times, powerful emotions like anger are telling us something that we need to pay attention to. There's some value in recognizing what's happening, in seeing the honeyed tip and the poisoned source, but also seeing: is there a message here? Is there something that needs responding to?

Sometimes, maybe, strong anger may arise in the face of injustice. We see the injustice, whether it's toward us or other beings, and in the face of that injustice, it arouses anger in us, and outrage.

Or maybe there's a situation with individuals who are involved in harmful actions, and the anger becomes a signal, a message that we need to set boundaries. That's important and skillful.

The challenge is: can we understand the message? Is this anger telling us something about the situation that needs a response? Can we understand what it's communicating and take appropriate action, but without being overwhelmed by the anger and then acting it out in ways that might be quite unskillful?

Do you see the difference? The arising of the emotion may be telling us something. We want to hear the message. But then we don't want to be acting out with that energy of anger. We want to be acting with balance, with effectiveness, with what's going to be skillful and appropriate in this moment.

One of the most famous lines in Buddhist teaching—and it's easy to hear this almost as a cliché, but there's profound meaning in it for all of us as we live—is where the Buddha said: hatred never ceases by hatred; it only ceases by love or loving-kindness. It's a very simple statement, but we can see it in the world. When there's hatred, when we're either on the receiving end or the giving end or we're just observing it, does hatred ever bring about peace? I don't think so. Hatred just breeds hatred. It comes back, it escalates, and so much of the huge conflict and suffering in the world stems from these mutual hatreds that sometimes have been going on for generations. Hatred never ceases by hatred, even though it's so easy to fall into that pattern.

So can we pay attention? Hopefully none of you are consumed by hatred, but even with little aspects of it, really pay attention and see that there's another possibility.

A very essential part of our practice is the gradual, expanding willingness to see every part of ourselves. I mentioned in a group this line from the book *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis, which was popular back in the day. One of the characters said, "Self-knowledge is always bad news." Which I think you're discovering. Because as we settle into mindfulness and awareness, this expanding ability to be with the whole show of our life and our minds, unless we happen to be saints, we're going to see the shadow side. There's a lot in us—much that's wholesome and some that's unwholesome.

Our practice of mindfulness gives us a greater and greater ability to actually open to all sides of ourselves. If we're not willing to see it, if we're not willing to acknowledge, "Oh yes, there are these defilements, they're there, I can see them," then there's no possibility actually for purification or for letting go, because we're not even willing to acknowledge that they're present. So even though it's a challenging part of the practice, it's extremely important and transforming when we're willing to simply see all of these negativities in the mind.

A big shift takes place when, instead of judging them or ourselves, we actually delight in seeing them—because we'd rather see them than not see them.

I had an experience with Sayadaw U Pandita. As I've mentioned, he was a pretty fierce, demanding teacher with a very powerful presence. Somehow, in sitting with him, especially in the early years, I would feel like my mind regressed to a three-year-old. Going in, I'd be really nervous, wondering, "Is he going to approve of me?" All of that stuff.

What he was doing during that first period of time was that in every interview—maybe not every one, but many—I'd give my report, and he would simply point out the various defilements in my mind, which he could tell just from my report. At first, it made me feel terrible. I was judging myself, and then I was

projecting that he was judging me, which just made it worse, which made me even more reluctant to go in. But he kept doing this.

It wasn't easy. But at a certain point, after months, I went in, gave my report, and he listed ten different defilements in my mind. "Here's greed, here's conceit, here's pride, here's this, here's that." And I just started to laugh. At that point, as he was going through the whole litany of my defilements, I just started to laugh.

It was amazing. As soon as I stopped taking it so seriously, he stopped doing it. That was the last time I went in for an interview and he did that. In retrospect now, I can see how skillful it was—though it didn't feel that way at the time. He just kept pushing my buttons as long as there was a reaction. When there was no longer a reaction, he didn't have to do it anymore.

In this opening to the full range of what's in there, we actually want to be seeing the shadow side as well as the bright side, because that's how we come to a fuller understanding of ourselves—and learn how to see it without self-judgment, without blame, without

This can actually be a delight. "Oh good, I see you."

One of the lines that appears quite often in the texts is when the Buddha will address Mara—Mara being the embodiment of ignorance and delusion. Mara will be up to some tricks, and the Buddha will simply say, "Mara, I see you." And then Mara disappears.

This is what it's like when we see the various defilements in our minds. We can say, "Ah, Mara, I see you. Jealousy, I see you. Pride, I see you. Greed, I see you." Just that—being mindful of the whole range of our experience—is the pathway to freedom, to liberation. And so we can take delight in the seeing.

As we become less judgmental of ourselves, one of the very happy consequences is that we become less judgmental of others. We can really see how much we've been projecting judgments onto others precisely because we're judging ourselves so much. When we learn not to do that, when we learn to simply be with things as they're presenting themselves, there's a tremendous lightness.

This was expressed beautifully by the English poet W.H. Auden. One line from his poems reads: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart." I love this because it acknowledges we're all in the same boat. We all have this mix of qualities. If we can be with that and understand it without judgment, without blame, without reactivity, then we can love ourselves and love others with all our crooked hearts. There's a lightness of being that comes from this.

Besides seeing what is wholesome in the mind—and wholesome is really just another word for happiness-producing; these are the qualities of mind that actually bring us happiness and peace—in the practice of mindfulness we can take it even deeper and really see what leads to freedom. Whatever word resonates for you—you might use freedom, or peace, or truth—whatever symbolizes the highest

understanding, the highest value.

The application of mindfulness that truly sets us on the path to freedom, not simply to the happiness of wholesome mind states but to actual liberation, is the mindfulness that allows us to see the momentary nature, the changing, impermanent nature of everything arising.

This is something we know conceptually, intellectually. If you happened to find anybody on the streets of Barre and asked them, "Do things change?" everybody would say, "Yeah, of course things change." This is not an esoteric truth. We all know it conceptually, but we're not living what we know because it's all up here. It's mindfulness that actually drops us directly into the experience of the unfolding process moment to moment. We experience for ourselves, intimately and directly, that all of life is a flow. There's nothing static, nothing that stays the same. It's all a process of change.

I want to do a little experiment now, because there's an aspect of the teachings that allows us to drop into the direct experience of change, but people often miss it because they don't necessarily understand what's involved.

If you just hold your hands together like this—you have the experience. Now, I want you to imagine being somebody who's never meditated before. You're that person now who's never meditated. If I asked you, "What do you feel?"—what do you think that person would say?

The answer I'm looking for is this: to the untutored person, the person untutored in meditation, the answer would be, "I feel my hands. I feel my hands touching."

But we do not feel our hands. There's no sensation called "hand." Hand is a concept. Hand is a mental construct, a name for what we see.

So we create the name. And so what do you feel? "I feel my hand touching." We don't feel hand. What we feel is warmth or coolness or pressure or tingling or vibration. Those are the actual sensations that we're feeling.

So why make a big deal of this? Because as long as we're living as we do—to a very large and unexamined extent, to the extent that we're living and perceiving in the world of our concepts about things—the concepts don't change. Hand today, hand tomorrow, hand yesterday. So when we're perceiving things on the level of concept, we are not in the direct experience of the flow of changes. And so we live in the illusion of things being relatively unchanging or relatively stable.

This is the same of everything. This is the body. As long as we think of "the body," we feel "the body." There's no sensation called body. The body is a concept. But what is it that we actually feel? The sensations that we feel are the things that I mentioned. And what's very apparent as soon as we drop to that level—and it's really simple, we just drop to the level of what's actually being felt rather than the conceptual image—as soon as we drop to the level of sensation, we are right there seeing the changes.

These sensations of pressure, tightness, tingling, tension, whether it's this or just the sensations in the body or as we're moving through the day—when you're being mindful on that level, the flow of changes becomes so apparent. This is a level we need to drop down to. Our meditation has to go from that level of concept to the level of direct experience, because that's where impermanence reveals itself.

So, halfway through. For you this hour may seem like five hours; for me it feels like five minutes. I just want to give you a few examples, simple ways of dropping down into this flow of impermanence, because this is the doorway to liberation.

In very simple things, you know, you hear a sound. The untutored person—what do you hear? "I hear the bell." We don't hear a bell. There's a certain vibration. And even the vibration of the sound, the sound itself, is not one thing. There's nothing permanent in that process. It's all moment to moment. It's a flow.

You take a step. The conceptual level is, "Oh, I feel my foot, I feel my leg." We don't feel foot, we don't feel leg. No sensation called foot. We feel heaviness, we feel pressure, we feel tightness. So first it's just to get to the level of sensation, and then when we're on that level, to see that even in one step it's not one thing. In one step, many, many sensations. In one breath—an in-breath, an out-breath, a rising—it's not one thing. How many different sensations are happening in the course of one breath? So that's the direction, that's how we want to use the mindfulness to really investigate on that level the impermanence of our experience.

I'm going to wrap this up. Why? Why do this? The Buddha gave a very simple statement outlining the trajectory of awakening. This is useful for us. He just lays out a few very simple elements of the process of liberation. And it's all tied, it all has its beginning in the experience of impermanence, which is why I wanted to emphasize it. He said, "In perceiving impermanence, the mind doesn't cling."

When it doesn't cling, the mind is not agitated. When it's not agitated, it personally attains Nibbana, the highest peace.

A few very simple steps: seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. Not clinging, the mind is not agitated. Not agitated, we're right there in the vicinity of awakening.

As with many other things, I had read this so many times and just took it as a description of the process. It was only in recent years that I took those words as an instruction to actually look, to verify whether what he said was actually true in my experience.

I invite you to do the same. At whatever time in the day, in any activity, whether it's sitting or walking or moving around—when you really feel like you are in the flow of perceiving impermanence, you're with the flow of changes—it could be something very simple, like just the flow of changes in a movement. Or if you're in choiceless awareness—breath, hearing, thinking—you're just noting moment after moment what's arising, but you're really seeing the changing nature. At those times when you are perceiving the flow of changes, check out whether there's any clinging in the mind.

See for yourself. You're not just accepting this as a description. You're asking, is what the Buddha said true for me? When we're seeing impermanence, is there clinging? I think you'll find that there isn't, but you need to see it for yourself. In the moment of clinging, it's like we're damming the flow. But when we're in the flow of impermanence, we can really experience the mind of not clinging. If you look to check, you will have a very direct taste of what the non-clinging mind is like. You don't have to wait thirty years to experience this. It's right here. When you're perceiving impermanence, just check out—is the mind clinging or not?

If you find there's not, if you're just in the flow of experience and you're not grabbing on, not holding on, then check out the next statement: when there's not clinging, there's no agitation. Just check—okay, there's no clinging. Is the mind agitated now or not? I think you'll see that it isn't. So again, we get a very profound taste of what it means to have a mind free of agitation. We can hear the words, but we have to translate them, connect them to our own experience. Oh, this is non-agitation.

In that state, we actually do get—even if it's an intuitive sense—in those times of really experiencing the non-agitation, we get an intuitive sense of the potential, the taste of enlightenment, of freedom. We're in the ballpark of liberation. We have to see this for ourselves, and it's not hard to do. It's just doing it.

I'll close with this. There was a very famous Burmese Sayadaw, a meditation teacher who was very renowned. He was both a fantastic scholar and a meditative adept, considered a great enlightened being. His name was Ledi Sayadaw. This is what he wrote, and it's really about what we've been talking about:

"Not seeing things arising and passing away is ignorance."

Not seeing the flow of impermanence is ignorance. And if we're not seeing it, we're just living in ignorance, doing the very many things that create suffering in our lives.

"Not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening."

This is not a trivial thing. Even though on some level it's very simple—we can drop into every aspect of our experience and see its changing nature—we have to practice doing it because we're not in that habit. Seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening. That's what you're doing here, or should be doing here.

I want to remind you of something I think you're all very well aware of: this is really a precious time. The creation of a retreat container like this, with this kind of support and environment for the practice, is so rare. It's rare in the world and rare in our lives.

So all of us, after great good fortune—karma, whatever conditions came together—find ourselves here in practice.

Let's just sit for a minute or two.

Thank you for listening.

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