Dukkha and Non-Self

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:19:22

After the Buddha's enlightenment, it's said that he spent seven weeks under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya—under and around the Bodhi tree—just contemplating the realization and understanding of his great awakening.

Then he was wondering who he might be able to share these profound teachings with. He thought of the five ascetics with whom he had been practicing the ascetic mortification disciplines for many years, and he thought that their minds would be ripe to hear and understand these teachings.

So he journeyed on foot from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath—it took him about six weeks. Sarnath is a small village across the river Ganges from the city of Benares, sometimes known as Varanasi. On the full moon of June, he gave his first discourse to these five ascetics. It's the discourse in which he outlined what is known as his teachings of the middle way—that is, the middle between the extremes of sense indulgence and self-mortification.

This first discourse is called "Turning the Wheel of the Dharma" or "Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion." This was his first teaching after his enlightenment. And it's interesting—this wheel of the Dharma has now rolled over the last 2,600 years across Asia, across Europe, across the oceans, to Barry, Massachusetts. It's quite an amazing happening, the transmission of these teachings over thousands of years.

In this first discourse, what's included is the structure, the basic foundation, of the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are the foundational Buddhist teachings in all the Buddhist traditions. This is what's basic and in common in all the traditions—in Theravada, in Mahayana, in Vajrayana. They will center in one way or another, or elaborate, these Four Noble Truths.

Upon hearing the teaching, one of the five ascetics realized the first stage of awakening called stream-enterer, or in Pali, sotapanna. This one ascetic heard the teachings and his mind opened to that level of realization. Then, practicing over the next few days with the Buddha as their guide—some good karma there—the remaining four ascetics realized the fruit of stream entry.

Then the Buddha gave the second discourse, which in Pali is called the Anatta Lakhana Sutta, which means the discourse on the characteristics of non-self or no-self. So in his very second discourse, he's laying out the teachings for this central understanding—the understanding of non-self. He gave this second discourse on the characteristics of non-self, and all five ascetics became fully enlightened.

So we're going to try for that tonight.

The teachings on non-self are really at the heart of the teachings. They're critical and central and essential in the Buddha's understanding of the path to awakening. But unlike the truths and the experience of impermanence or of dukkha—which are obvious and not difficult to understand even if we don't fully realize them yet, but we can easily grasp their import—the teachings on non-self are in many ways counter-intuitive. They run counter to our common sense, everyday understanding of who we are.

We live our lives having been taught, and we grow up with a very strong sense that there's a self here who's experiencing life's experiences. And that's hardly questioned. Certainly there's nothing in our culture, or even particularly in Western philosophical traditions, that even remotely refers to this idea or understanding of non-self. In fact, our very language—the languages that we use, most languages—reinforce the sense of "I." "I" is the subject of our grammar in many ways. So we're continually reinforcing the notion that there is an "I" who is the subject of all experience. It's no wonder that when we hear "non-self," we think, what can that possibly mean?

The Buddha went on to explain it and to really show us how we can begin to open to this understanding for ourselves. I'm going to be reading at different times some excerpts from this sutta, the sutta explaining the characteristics of non-self. When you listen to the words, try to listen to them as if it were the Buddha speaking directly to you, rather than as just Buddhist philosophy. Because if you're listening to it as Buddhist philosophy, it's very easy for the mind to get in—you agree, you disagree. It's not that helpful, because it's all on the intellectual, conceptual level. If you listen to the words as if the Buddha is speaking to you, just as he was speaking to the five ascetics, and you really let the words in, into your heart, and relate them to your experience, then they have transformative power. And maybe there will be five or six or a hundred enlightened beings at the end.

In reading from the sutta, there's one word that I'm not going to translate from the Pali, and that is the word dukkha. The Four Noble Truths all revolve around this word. The first noble truth is the truth of dukkha.

The second noble truth is the cause of dukkha. The third noble truth is the end of dukkha. The fourth noble truth is the path leading to the end of dukkha. So it seems pretty important that we have a clear understanding of what this word means.

The problem is that in English, there is no single word that captures the full range of what's meant by this Pali term. As many of you probably know, most commonly it's translated as suffering—the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, the path leading to the end. And in many situations this translation is appropriate. We're all familiar with the pain and suffering that can occur, and does occur, in our minds and bodies during our lives. This is not some esoteric experience. We all experience suffering of different kinds. So one of the meanings of dukkha is suffering, and that's fairly easy to understand.

But how do we reconcile the Buddha's far-reaching statement that all conditioned things—which means

everything that arises in our experience, in the mind, in the body, in the world, the entire conditioned flow of experience—how do we reconcile his statement that all conditioned things are dukkha with our experience of many things in life being pleasurable? How does that fit together? If we take dukkha just to mean suffering, then it doesn't really make sense, because as we know, much of our lives may not involve any particular suffering. We may be enjoying beautiful things, happy states.

Other words besides suffering may more fully convey what dukkha means, and it's important to understand this because then we can enter into this discourse and receive the full import of what the Buddha is trying to say. Words like unreliable—dukkha meaning unreliable—or insecure, or ultimately unsatisfying. These terms more completely encompass what is meant by the term dukkha.

So when the Buddha says all conditioned things are dukkha, it's not that they're always suffering, but they are always unreliable. They are always incapable of giving lasting fulfillment and satisfaction precisely because they don't last. In this understanding of dukkha, we're already beginning to relate it more fully to our life experience. No matter what's arising, it may be very pleasurable, it may bring us a lot of happiness—yet even in the enjoyment, even in the happiness, we can still understand the dukkha aspect as being unreliable, as being not capable of ultimately fulfilling us.

So when you listen to the Buddha's words from the Sutta and you hear the term dukkha, keep in mind this more expansive meaning. It doesn't simply mean suffering, although that's one aspect of it. It also means that all things are unreliable, ultimately unsatisfying, and that this can apply—and does apply—to every aspect of our experience. We should investigate for ourselves to see if it really does apply in our lives.

It is this understanding of dukkha, the unreliability of phenomena—and sometimes the painful nature of experiences, so suffering is included—but it's in understanding the expanded version that we can begin to see the connection between our experience and realization of dukkha and of anatta, or not-self. There's a very intimate connection between these two aspects. And it's really in understanding the relationship of dukkha to selflessness, of dukkha to anatta, that opens the doorway to freedom, to realization.

So this is from the Sutta, just a few lines from it. Usually discourses are introduced with a little preface: "On one occasion, the Blessed One was living at Benares, Varanasi, in the deer park in Sarnath, and there he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five." Remember, these are the five ascetics. This is the second discourse. He said, "Bhikkhus." "Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this.

Just one little note on the term bhikkhu, which is often translated as monk, or bhikkhuni as nun. But in this context bhikkhu also has a bigger meaning. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator of our time, commented that bhikkhu in its broadest sense means anyone who is walking on the path. So in that sense, we're all bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. We're all on the path, walking it. When the Buddha says "bhikkhus," he's really talking to us all. You should hear it that way.

"Bhikkhus, form"—and by form, what's meant is the physical body, the physical material elements. This is

what's included, what's designated by the term form.

You might think of form most easily as the body, but it really encompasses all physical elements. Because form is non-self—or body is not self—were form self, then this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine: let my form or my body be thus, let my form or body not be thus. But because form is non-self, it leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine: let my form be like this, let my form be not like this.

Let me unpack that a little. It's really very simple, but the language may seem somewhat archaic. Here the Buddha is highlighting two aspects of the relationship between dukkha and non-self. First, he's saying that the elements of the body lead to affliction. If we were really self, we generally wouldn't take those things that lead to affliction and suffering to be "I" or to be "me." But the elements of the body do lead to affliction. Second, these physical elements are ungovernable—they are ultimately not subject to our will. The body doesn't respond to our commands. Let my body be like this. Let it not be like this. It's not like that. The body is following its own natural laws. So in two ways: it leads to affliction, and the elements are not governable according to our will.

We need to investigate this for ourselves—not hearing it as Buddhist philosophy, but seeing: is this true in my own experience? And we must observe how these two aspects, leading to affliction and not being governable, play out in our lives.

How do the physical elements lead to affliction? This is not hard to see, even if very often we don't like to acknowledge it. We can really observe the afflictive nature of the elements, what we call the body, in some of the very ordinary activities of our daily life. There is the affliction of hunger and thirst. We don't often recognize this because for most of us, these afflictions are easily remedied. We're thirsty, we take a drink. We're hungry, we take some food. But it is precisely the dukkha of the elements that leads us to these remedies. Why do we take a drink? Because there's some kind of suffering, of thirst. Why do we eat? Because there's the affliction or the suffering of hunger.

For many of us, this suffering is easily remedied. But for millions, perhaps billions of people, these basic needs are not easily fulfilled, and so the dukkha aspect of the elements in those situations becomes extremely obvious. Some time ago I read that over a billion people in the world don't have access to clean, safe drinking water. That's huge. If every time we take a drink, we're opening ourselves to disease, that's real affliction, that's suffering. The same article mentioned that millions of women across the world often have to walk three or more miles a day to carry twenty-five pounds of water, just to get water to drink, to bathe, and to wash.

We forget this. Some years ago I was with my family for Thanksgiving, and we did a little round saying what we were grateful for. One thing that came to mind—I was coming from teaching a three-month retreat—was the fact that water comes out of a tap, that most of the time we can get hot water out of a tap. We don't even think about it because it's so ordinary. Yet for many people that's not available, and when

it's not, it becomes very clear that hunger and thirst are real bodily afflictions. There is suffering involved in this, and because of that suffering, we're moved to different kinds of actions.

We can also see the afflictive nature of the material elements in the very intense natural disasters that happen.

The eruption of volcanoes, floods, hurricanes—these are physical elements, just the elements of nature. And yet, in those forms, they're tremendously destructive. We've all seen the amount of suffering caused by the impact of those elements.

We can experience the afflictive nature of the body in the simple necessity to move and change posture in order to relieve discomfort. At a certain point, regardless of what posture you're in, it will become painful. You're walking. It feels great—walking, moving the body. Walk for two hours, three hours, four hours, five hours. "Oh, it feels good. I'll just walk for days." No, the body gets tired. When it gets tired or sore or achy, we have to rest it. We have to sit or lie down.

If you're sitting—oh, great, I'm sitting. I have a nice posture here. I'll just sit till I get enlightened. I recommend trying it. But what happens? After a certain point, sitting in one posture, the body gets stiff. It gets painful. We have to change the posture in order to relieve the suffering. "Oh, that's okay. I'll just lie down. Lying down will be really comfortable."

I had this thought once when I was practicing in India. I was so fed up with the suffering of the body from the postures, so I got a big piece of thick foam to sleep on, to lie down on. I lay down on my back, nothing crossed—my legs weren't crossed, my arms weren't crossed—supported by this nice, soft foam rubber. It was comfortable for about half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes. At a certain point, even in that position, nothing crossed, completely supported, it gets painful.

Why? Because in the nature of the material elements, there is an afflictive nature in the very elements themselves. It's not that we're doing something wrong. This is the nature of the elements, of having a body. And it's not hard to see if we're paying attention.

There's a little catch phrase which would be very interesting for you to apply in your practice as a tool of investigation. The catch phrase is: movement masks dukkha. At times, just out of interest, every time you move, see if you can pay attention to what's motivating the movement. Very often—not always, sometimes we're moving out of a greed for something that may not be associated in that moment with physical discomfort—but largely, movement masks dukkha. We move in order to alleviate, to relieve a kind of stress in the body. Pay attention to that, because it will give you a very direct insight into what the Buddha is saying: because form, the body, is non-self, it leads to affliction. It's just following its own laws. It's not subject to our will.

What's interesting is that because we're not paying attention in this way, as we alleviate the suffering—either by taking a drink or taking food or changing posture—we confuse how movement masks

dukkha with the belief that we're in control of it. "I'm in control of whether the body feels dukkha or not." This obscures the nature of the elements themselves. But at some point or other, the ungovernable nature of these elements—even though we can make these various moves to mask the dukkha—at some point the afflictive nature becomes obvious and unavoidable.

Probably we would all like to stay young and healthy with a vigorous, active body that can accomplish everything we'd like it to do. But the body is not obliging us in this way. Quite without our agreement, the body ages and becomes ill and will eventually die. It's subject to all kinds of unwished-for ailments and diseases. This is the nature of the elements. Again, it's not that we've somehow made a mistake in life, that we've taken a wrong turn, and on this turn the body ages.

And it wouldn't have aged if I had made the right decision. No, it's unavoidable because it is the very nature of the elements. And this is what the Buddha is pointing out to us.

What's so amazing really is that when we look, it's completely obvious. And yet, for the most part in our lives, we don't look. We are distracting ourselves from this very basic truth.

It's for this reason that the Buddha said form, the body, the physical elements, is not self. If the body were self, we should be able to determine, "Let it be like this and not like this." But we can't determine that. Why? Because it is ungovernable according to our will. We can influence, and the things we do certainly influence what goes on in the body, but ultimately, things are simply following the laws of nature.

And the very laws of nature—and this is something people sometimes don't like to acknowledge—the physical elements, the nature of the elements, do lead at times to affliction. So we just want to see that and acknowledge: yes, this is how it is. This is the nature of the body. And so then we're not thrown when these afflictions happen to us. This is the Dharma. This is how things are.

So what do we do as we begin to open to this understanding? What do we do in response to it? How do we engage with the body, with the world, with our lives, knowing this?

The Buddha, again, pointed out that given this nature of the body—that the material elements lead to affliction—he showed the way to be free in this. He gave some very specific instructions. He said, "Bhikkhus," and that's all of us, "whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

So what does abandon mean? All of this is translation from Pali into English, and sometimes the English words can have a connotation that's not exactly what's meant from the Pali term. Abandon here—abandon what is not yours—doesn't mean to ignore. It doesn't mean to deny. It doesn't mean to not take care of the body or take care of the material world around us.

Rather, the Buddha is saying these elements in their nature lead to affliction—don't cling to it. Don't cling to it as being I or mine. Don't cling to things staying a certain way, because they won't. Everything is in a

process of change and transformation. The whole world is in this process of change.

And yet how much of our suffering in our lives, on all kinds of levels, happens because there's some situation that we want to stay? You meet the love of your life and are hopelessly—or hopefully—in love. And you want the person to remain exactly as they are: "Yes, I love you just the way you are, and don't change." Well, if anything is a setup for suffering, that's going to be it.

The Buddha is saying don't cling to any aspect of this process, because things are going to change, and not always change according to our liking. Sometimes it will, but sometimes it won't, and we don't necessarily have control of that.

So the challenge is really to apply this understanding. To know it intellectually or to grasp it conceptually is a beginning, but that's not enough. We actually have to apply this understanding in how we're relating to the experiences of our body, of our mind.

The identification with our bodies is so deeply conditioned. What's the first response often to just the question, "Who are you?" This is me. This is who I am. We point to our bodies. We are so deeply conditioned to take the body to be me, to be self.

So how can we keep these understandings of non-self present? Because the elements of the body, the material elements, do lead to affliction in so many different ways, and they are ungovernable—we can't control and say, "Oh, let my body stay like this." It's not going to happen. So how do we integrate this understanding in our lives and really keep it in the forefront of our awareness?

I'm sure none of this comes as a surprise to you. It's all obvious as soon as we look, as soon as we pay attention. But for the most part, we just put it on the back burner because, as Al Gore said about something quite different, it's an inconvenient truth. We don't like to see it. But in not liking to see, we do the very things which cause more suffering—we get attached and we cling. And that just exacerbates the whole situation.

So how do we keep this awareness, this understanding, in the forefront of our lives? There's a collection of discourses in Pali called the Anguttara Nikaya, which means the numerical discourses. It's simply an arrangement of the Buddhist texts in a certain way. In it, the Buddha taught a series of reflections that can have a very powerful effect both in our formal meditation, but even more importantly, in how we live our everyday lives.

"Bhikkhus, there are these five themes that should often be reflected upon by a householder or one who has gone forth. What five? One, I am subject to old age. I am not exempt from old age. Two, I am subject to illness. I am not exempt from illness."

As you hear these reflections, is this true for you? Could you say this to yourself and really be connecting it to your experience? I am subject to illness. I am not exempt from illness. I am subject to death. I am not

exempt from death. I must be parted from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me.

How often do we reflect on that? That one way or another we are going to be separated from everybody we love and everybody that's dear to us. And I am not exempt.

And finally: I am the owner of my karma. I am the owner, the heir, of my actions. I have karma, actions, as my origin, as my relative, as my resort. I will be the heir of whatever karma, actions, good or bad, that I do.

This is powerful. It's what I referred to in my talk the other night—the understanding that what we do matters. Our actions of body, speech, and mind bring about results. We are the heirs of our own actions and the motivations behind them.

So frequently practicing these recollections: I am subject to old age, I am not exempt. I am subject to illness, I am not exempt. I am subject to death, I am not exempt. I must be parted from everything I hold dear, and I am not exempt. I am the heir of my actions.

The Buddha is suggesting we reflect on these daily. They are a wake-up call to what is true. This is not something fanciful, and it's not some metaphysical proposition. The Buddha is pointing us to some very obvious truths of our lives, but ones that, for the most part, we don't really spend much time contemplating. Probably if you spoke to somebody not involved in some kind of practice like this, and you said you're contemplating old age, illness, and death, they would ask, "Why would you want to do that? That's morbid." But it's not morbid at all. We are connecting with what is true. Krishnamurti, the great Indian teacher, said, "It is the truth which liberates, not your efforts to be free." Our efforts are to see what is true, and in the realization, the seeing of what is true—that's what liberates us.

Now what's really strange—I've noticed this so much in my own mind, having done these reflections somewhat—I'm subject to illness and I'm not exempt. I've seen in myself so often when I'm feeling well and energetic, and then I begin to feel some scratchy throat or cold coming on or whatever, some illness, there very often is this moment of—I'm not sure whether indignation is too strong a word—but it comes out of the feeling that I am exempt. Why should this be happening to me? It's really striking how even though on one level we know this is just the nature of things, this is the Dharma, we still feel exempt. Yes, this is true for everybody else, but somehow I'm in a special category. Somewhere deep inside of us—at least in me—I can see that attitude. So the reflection, the recollection, keeps reminding us that we're not exempt, that this is true for all of us.

These reflections really are a wake-up call that can awaken us from the enchantment of thinking we are exempt, that somehow if we just get everything right we'll go through life without any of these things happening. No, that's just fantasy. And the reflections, the recollections, in doing them keep reminding us of that.

Let me share one other aspect of this non-exemption. One time I was teaching a retreat for environmental

activists out in New Mexico at this beautiful wilderness ranch. On the last day of the retreat, we all went for a walk—it was way out in the wilderness, in the high mountains. We walked along the river that ran through the property. There were a lot of rocks, but it was beautiful, a fun hike. But on the way back, I slipped. It had rained, so the rocks were slippery, and I hyperextended my knee.

At the time, I managed to get back and wasn't too concerned. Then I was going to give the talk that night, and in those days I was still sitting cross-legged. Things have changed—not to my liking, but there it is. Before giving the talk, I thought, "You better not sit cross-legged. You did something to your knee." But I overrode that thought. So I started giving an hour talk, and I couldn't get up at the end. I had to be carried back to my room. It was pretty embarrassing. I really had damaged my knee from doing that.

All night long my mind was just going over this whole thing—self-judgment, how could I have done that. I had a really busy teaching schedule. I was scheduled to go to Europe, and just a very busy summer was ahead of me, and I didn't know what I was going to do. There was a lot of agitation in my mind. Then at a certain point, sometime in the middle of the night, a certain mantra arose in my mind that put the whole thing in a helpful perspective. The phrase that came to mind was: anything can happen anytime.

Anything can happen anytime. Conditions are constantly changing and we don't have control over it. You might hear that and think such a thought might lead to a kind of defensiveness or paranoia—anything can happen anytime. But it was just the opposite. When that thought came to mind and I realized the truth of it, the heart and mind relaxed. Instead of blaming myself for it, or instead of thinking, "Oh, if only I had protected myself in a certain way, this wouldn't have happened," the understanding that anything can happen anytime—and does—actually allowed the heart to relax, to become non-defensive. Yes, this is just part of life. These things happen. And it made the whole situation, at least internally, tremendously more easeful.

In a very similar recollection, the Buddha offers a reflection that reminds us of the universality of these experiences. It wasn't just that I had done something stupid and then this happened. Anything can happen anytime, and this is true for all of us. This is what the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, what is subject to old age grows old. When this happens, the noble disciple reflects: I am not the only one for whom what is subject to old age grows old. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to illness falls ill. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to death dies. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to destruction is destroyed. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to loss is lost."

I find this just a very helpful reminder, because so often we personalize the difficulties we're going through, whatever they may be. Not only do we think, "This is only happening to me, why me?" but then we often blame ourselves in one way or another. We forget the universality of these truths—that this is the nature of having a mind and body, that this is what happens to everyone. We're all in the same boat with this.

So we really begin to understand that our life situations, whatever they may be—and we all have different conditions—are really not unique. We share so much. We are all part of this great matrix of life and death, creation and destruction. This big picture of what being alive entails. And when we take this big picture and see that it's universal, it really opens the possibility of relating to it in a wiser way, in a freer way.

So we come to realize both the aspect of not-self that is dukkha—that's the aspect where the elements lead to affliction, where it's not governable—and also an aspect of not-self that is freeing, that is ultimately freeing. This is why this realization of the Buddha's is so powerful for us. It's really the heart of what makes liberation possible.

We begin to understand this freeing aspect: that not a single element of this mind or body or experience in the world, not a single aspect of what arises, belongs to us. From the very beginning there is not a self to whom it could belong. This is a radically different way of understanding our life experience, because mostly in our lives everything refers back to me. I'm the one who's knowing it all. I'm the one who's experiencing it all. This is my body.

To have the understanding that nothing in our experience belongs to us, and that in fact there was never a self to whom it could belong—instead of referring everything back to me, we begin to experience life where all experience is arising and passing by itself, with no self-referential aspect to it. Experience is just what it is.

This has very important implications. Again, from the Buddha:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, people were to carry off the grass, the sticks, the branches and foliage of this Jeta Grove"—that was a grove offered to the Buddha for his retreats, for the monks and nuns to stay—"or to burn them or to do with them as they wish. As you saw this happening, would you think, 'People are carrying us off or burning us or doing with us as they wish'?"

"No, Venerable Sir, because that is neither our self nor belongs to our self."

So that part's pretty obvious. If people are taking things out of the forest and burning it or doing whatever, we wouldn't think that they're doing it to us. Why? Because we know that's certainly not self.

Here the Buddha makes this very radical assertion, which we need to verify for ourselves. He said: "So too, bhikkhus, form of the body, the material elements, is not yours. Feelings are not yours. Perception is not yours. Volitional formations are not yours. Consciousness is not yours. Abandon it, let go of clinging. When you have let go of clinging to what is not yours, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

Here we're getting to the heart of what not-self means in terms of relationship to our own life experience. The question is, given all these teachings about impermanence and the ungovernability of the elements and of non-self, why is the sense of self, the view of self, the concept of self so strong in us? If it's not true—and the Buddha is saying it's really a misperception, we're misperceiving things—if it's not true,

why is it so universally and so deeply conditioned in us? How does this sense of self, this idea of self, arise?

When we observe the body, which most of us take to be who we are—this is me, this is my body—when we look at it more closely, not superficially, we see that what we're calling the body is a collection of different systems. There's the skeleton made of bones. There's the circulatory system with all the blood vessels. There's the nervous system with all the nerves running through the body, and the organs. When we begin to really look deeply at what the body is, we get a very different picture than our usual perception. Seen in this way, we probably would not say, "The gallbladder is me. I'm the gallbladder." Or, "I'm the liver." Unlikely.

Yet it's so strange. We wrap all of this up very nicely in skin and become entranced with the package. We're not looking to see what's inside. And so we become very attached to the body—not only to our own bodies, but to other people's bodies as well. But how attached would we be if we had x-ray vision? If we could really see what's underneath this very nice covering, we might not be so clingy.

And of course, the corollary of our attachment to the body—attachment to our own body—is the fear of losing it. Why do people have fear of death? Because of attachment to the body. We often have fear of our own death, or there's grief at the thought of losing the body of somebody we love or are attached to. There's grief at other people's death. Why? Because we're not seeing what the body really is. We're satisfied with this superficial perception.

If you look even deeper, on a cellular level or an atomic level, the body is mostly empty space. In all of the atoms, the amount of matter compared to the space between the atomic particles is minuscule. I read someplace—and I hope it's true because it's such a startling statement, and it sounds like it could be true; unfortunately, I don't remember the source, but it was in some scientific article—that all of the matter of the body, if condensed, would be no larger than a particle of dust.

I find that totally remarkable. Of all the atoms, the electrons and protons and subatomic particles which are incredibly small—if all of that were compressed, it wouldn't be any bigger than a particle of dust. So what is it that we're attached to? What is it here that we're calling self, this body? It's a particle of dust.

There's a strong sense of self when we're identified with our thoughts and emotions, with all the internal stories we tell about ourselves or others. One little exercise you could do—I've mentioned it in a few of my groups and found it really helpful. It's very clear by now how often we just get lost in long trains of thought. We're carried away in this whole internal movie, the internal drama with all kinds of attendant emotions. Then at a certain point we wake up from being lost.

Well, that also happens many, many times a day with quickly passing thoughts that are not big, not dramatic, not troublesome. Maybe a plan or a memory—something relatively innocuous—but the thought comes and for even a short period of time, maybe thirty seconds or a minute or two minutes, we're lost in the thought. Then we wake up and we're back, aware of whatever we're doing. This happens countless

times a day, these quickly passing thoughts that go through the mind.

It's a great exercise just to set the intention as you move about during the day. This can be outside the times of formal meditation, where you simply watch out for those thoughts, so that we become more aware of all those moments when we're dropping into the dream of thought—which often has to do, in one way or another, with the sense of self. Maybe it's a plan for something we're going to do, or a memory of something we have done, or some comment we have. Very often the content of the thoughts are self-referential in one way or another. But because they're not particularly troublesome and they're quick, most of us don't pay much attention. We're just going through the day and the thoughts come and go. We're basically ignoring them.

It was very fruitful for me in my practice when I began to have the strong intention to keep an eye out for these thoughts. It was quite remarkable, because then you are really bringing the practice right into the midst of your daily life. You can see in all of those situations the difference between being lost in the dream of a thought and being awake, being aware. You'll have thousands upon thousands of opportunities every day to just notice that. So I would really urge you to begin making that experiment. It was very, very revealing.

We begin to see, as we become more aware—and I think you've probably already glimpsed this—as you notice in your practice throughout the day thoughts coming and going and emotions coming and going, that in seeing them, in being aware of them as they arise and seeing their impermanence, seeing how they just come and go, we begin to get genuine glimpses and realizations of thoughts not being self and emotions not being self. They're arising out of conditions. And the conditions change and the thought disappears.

So this is just a little description from the Tibetan tradition.

Thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds, having no roots, no home. I love that image of roots and home, because we often relate to the thoughts and emotions that arise as having roots. "I'm thinking this," or "I'm feeling this." So I like the image of just imagining a cloud in the sky with a root coming down, tethered to the ground. It's such a ridiculous image, but that's exactly what we're doing with these thoughts and emotions. They are really just like clouds in the sky—they are untethered. But we tether them by not being aware, not being mindful that they're there, and then identifying with them.

A thought comes, and our attitude about it is, "I'm thinking," or "I'm feeling this"—not seeing that this overlay of "I" and "mine" is extra. That's not in the thought itself. It's not in the emotion itself. What we're doing is tethering these internal experiences, giving them a root and anchoring them to some imaginary sense of self. We're adding the "I" and "mine" to it.

One thing that misleads us is that when we're looking at experience and what we're calling ourself, there is a recognizable pattern. I get up in the morning, look in the mirror—that's me. I'm seeing a certain image

and it's recognizable, not too dissimilar from the day before. This gives rise to that sense of self, of me, of Joseph, because the pattern is recognizable. But when we look more deeply—it's like looking underneath the skin—when we look underneath the pattern, we begin to see that there is no I, no self, no Joseph behind it. It's not that there's a self to whom all these elements belong.

The thought is the thinker. The thought is thinking itself. It's not that there's an "I" who is having the thought. The thought is a mental phenomenon doing its own thing. The thought thinks. But we add to it: "I'm thinking," or "This is my thought." That's extra—that's not in the experience itself.

The same is true with emotions. It's love that loves. It's fear that fears. It's anger that angers. It's joy that joys. Life is a whole set of different conditions, internal and external, that give rise to these phenomena. Something is giving rise—there are causes and conditions for thoughts to come and emotions to come. It's just coming to the realization that they don't belong to anyone.

I hope you can get even just a glimmer of this possibility. This whole life process is empty phenomena—empty of self—empty phenomena rolling on, moment after moment. There are physical sensations arising and passing, thoughts coming and going, emotions coming and going. It's just this flow, this flow of impermanent, changing phenomena. And if we want to say the self is anything, we could say the self is the flow of changing phenomena. It's not a thing to whom experiences belong. It's like the current of a river—there's no river apart from the flowing water.

The most subtle aspect of this flow of appearances is this: even when we really do get a sense that the physical elements, the physical sensations, are just coming and going, that thoughts are coming and going, emotions are coming and going—even when we're beginning to glimpse this selfless nature, that they're arising out of conditions, that they don't belong to me, that we don't have to claim them—the most subtle aspect of our experience which gives rise to this strongly held view of self, common for most of us, is when we identify with consciousness.

The physical elements are pretty obvious, and even thoughts and emotions—we can see pretty clearly their impermanent, changing nature. But even after a lot of practice, we can still see how we're identifying with the knowing, and so create a knower. Knowing is part of the process, but we identify with that part of the process, and so we create the sense of an observer. We create the sense of a witness. "All of this is changing, but I'm the one knowing it all."

This is a place that takes a great deal of care and attention and subtlety to really cut through—the identification with consciousness, with knowing, with the knowing faculty. Tonight I'm going to finish because I can't leave it here. It's just too interesting. Through a growing awareness, we can begin to see and investigate how consciousness itself arises out of conditions.

It's arising and changing in each moment. Tomorrow morning I'm going to offer just a few suggestions and techniques for how to cut through this identification with knowing, because consciousness becomes

the last holdout of self. It's so subtle. The other aspects of our experience, we begin to get a handle on. It's not easy, but it's not that difficult. But to actually become mindful of knowing, mindful of consciousness, mindful of awareness—mindful so that we don't identify with it, so that we see that this too is just an impersonal process—that takes very dedicated looking. I'll offer some suggestions for how to do this tomorrow.

First, I want to give one image which may help us understand the difference between our superficial perception of things and the deeper realization of what's actually there. If you go outside after a rainstorm, maybe the sun comes out and you see a rainbow. We all have this experience—it's pleasant, enjoyable, beautiful. "Oh, look at the rainbow in the sky." But if we look or investigate a little more carefully and just ask the question, "What is a rainbow? Is a rainbow something in and of itself?" No, it's an appearance that occurs when there's a certain combination of moisture and light and air. The conditions come together and a rainbow appears. But a rainbow is not something in itself. It's an appearance dependent on changing conditions.

Joseph, self, each one of you—is like a rainbow. There is an appearance. We're seeing what we see, so it's not denying that level. But it's a designation for an appearance, and we want to see what gives rise to the appearance. That is all of these changing elements which I described, none of which can be taken to be self—just as the air is not the rainbow, and the light is not the rainbow, and the moisture is not the rainbow. These are just the conditions which give rise to its appearance.

The Buddha gave a very straightforward and simple instruction to his son, Rahula. It would be good to practice with this. This is something the Buddha gave to his son as a vehicle for his awakening, his liberation. He said that every aspect of mind and body should be seen with perfect wisdom as it is: "This is not mine. This is not I. This is not myself." Just imagine applying that little mantra of understanding, that wisdom mantra, to every aspect of your experience, especially those where you see yourself getting caught. "This is not mine. This is not I. This is not myself." It's the reminder. It really becomes a mantra of liberation.

Now there's one very unexpected consequence of this deepening realization of selflessness. As we settle back into the freedom of that space of things just appearing and disappearing according to causes and conditions, and it's not referring back to anyone—what we're calling self is this flow of changing conditions, there's not a self behind it to whom it's happening—the more we understand that, there is a growing sense of connection, a growing sense of intimacy. Why? Because we realize that from the beginning, there was no one there to be separate. And in that understanding, we begin to appreciate that selflessness and love are the same thing. These are not two different things. They're just different ways of understanding it.

I'll end with this teaching from one of the great Tibetan masters, Kalu Rinpoche. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things." We live in the world of self, of I, of Joseph, of rainbow, of concepts.

"We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all."

This is really a profound realization. Often people hear about selflessness, not-self—"I'm not this, I'm not that"—and they get scared by it.

But it's like stepping out of a prison of contraction. When we realize this, we see that we are nothing—there's no self to whom things belong. But being nothing, we are everything. We settle into the totality of what is actually happening moment to moment. This is the great transformation of insight in our practice.

So let's sit for a few hours, since you're on a roll of extended attention.

Before I ring the bell, there's one more little teaching to end with, in case there was still some confusion about self and not-self. This is from a Tibetan teacher: "It's not that you are not real. You are real, but you think you're *really* real. You exaggerated."

So just remember that. Real, but not really real.

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