Cutting Through the Identification with Consciousness, the Knowing Mind

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 58:45

Last night I talked a little bit about how identification with consciousness or with awareness can become the last hideout of self. And so in one way or another we want to begin the investigation of how to be mindful of the knowing, mindful of awareness, of consciousness, without identifying with it—allowing it to fulfill its function of cognizing and realizing that this aspect of experience, the knowing mind, also arises out of conditions, is not I, is not mine, is not self.

So the question is: how can we begin to get a glimpse of how to become mindful of this essential part of our experience, the knowing mind? To get a glimpse of how we might become mindful of it in a way in which we're cutting through the identification.

The different Buddhist traditions have different techniques for this. Within the range of the Buddhist traditions there are many philosophical differences and differences of methodology. But the point of all the teachings, in whatever form or method is used, is to see the selfless nature, to realize the selfless nature of whatever's arising.

There are two approaches that I want to mention now.

One of the most classical approaches to becoming mindful of the knowing, mindful of consciousness, is to realize that in every moment two things are happening: there's an object and the knowing of the object. We hear a sound—there's the sound, which is physical matter, and then the knowing of the sound, which is consciousness. There's a movement and the knowing of the movement. A sensation and the knowing of the sensation. Our experience is this pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

We want to go from the more conventional way of interpreting experience—"I'm hearing a sound," or "I'm thinking a thought," or "I'm feeling a sensation"—that's our usual conventional description. But the more meditative understanding would be to experience each moment as simply being this pair. Sound arises, there's a knowing of it. Thought arises, knowing of it. It's very simple. It's what's actually happening moment to moment, but we're framing it in this way and really experiencing in this way.

When we begin to frame experience in terms of this momentary knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object—as we get very clear that that's what's happening moment to moment—then gradually it becomes intuitively obvious that the knowing itself is arising and passing with each object. There's

knowing an object arising and passing, knowing an object arising and passing, knowing an object arising and passing. We're beginning to get a taste, at least, of the fact that consciousness itself is part of this impersonal process arising and passing.

As you're sitting, you want to investigate this in a non-obsessive way. We're talking about really getting to the heart of where we are most subtly caught up. If it's of interest to you, just begin to look at this and play around with this framework of understanding. It may be that at times you'll get just a hit or a sense: "Oh yeah, this is how things are happening."

For example, in the sitting, if you're feeling the breath at the abdomen, there's a rising movement. And right along with the rising, simultaneous, is the knowing of it. If it were a corpse having its stomach pumped, the rising would be there, but there's no knowing. So there's the movement—this is just physical, just material elements. But along with this, there is a knowing. The falling—that's just the physical elements. But along with it is the knowing.

One thing to keep in mind is that as you're paying attention to this, there's nothing you have to do. This doesn't have to be created. This is how it's happening. It's just settling back and observing that this is how it's happening.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the knowing and the object are distinct but not separable. It's not that you should be looking for some space where the knowing is over here and the object is over here. It's not like that. It's a unity. It's arising as a unity—two different aspects arising together but distinct.

I'll give you an example. If you just look at this, we can be seeing or emphasizing the awareness either of the color or the form, the shape. Shape and color are two different things.

They're two different aspects. Shape is not color, and color is not shape. And yet they're not separable. The shape is in a color, and the color has a shape. So these two are not separable, but they are distinct. Is that clear?

It's the same way with knowing and the object. It's just like color and form, color and shape. They're arising together, they can't be separated, but there are two distinct aspects. One is the material elements, which don't know anything—it's just physical matter. And simultaneously, inseparably, in each moment of arising, is the knowing of it.

So it's really quite simple, but it takes some settling into this particular perspective. There's the rising, falling, or in and out, the breath coming in—that's just the physical sensations. Simultaneous with the in-breath is the knowing. Simultaneous with the out-breath is the knowing.

This is one way of beginning to understand the process without adding the sense of I or me or mine to it. The knowing itself becomes part of the unfolding process. In one of the early stages of vipassanā insight, there is a stage called purification of view, which is where we begin to get a clearer sense of how this

process is actually unfolding. It's this insight that in every moment there is the knowing and an object—this pairwise progression arising and passing, arising and passing—and that's all that's happening. The sense of I or mine is extra; that's an overlay. So this insight is really, in a way, the beginning of the whole vipassanā path unfolding.

That's one approach, which you could play with and just see if you can connect with it in some way or other.

The other approach comes more from the Zen or Tibetan tradition, in terms of cutting the identification with knowing. It's best illustrated by a little Zen story, quite well known, of a student coming to see Bodhidharma, the person who brought Buddhism from India to China. This disciple comes and says, "I'm suffering a lot. Can you please pacify my mind?" Bodhidharma, who had been sitting in his cave for seven years or nine years or something, comes out. At first he's reluctant to give the teachings, but the disciple is insistent: "Please teach me. My mind is suffering so much. Please, please pacify it."

As the dialogue is expressed, Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind, and I'll pacify it."

Now, as you listen to this, really, there's a profound teaching here, so let it go in. Show me your mind, and I'll pacify it.

And the disciple says, "I've looked for it everywhere, and I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There—it's already pacified."

It's in the non-findability of consciousness, the non-findability of awareness, that automatically cuts through any identification with it. As one Tibetan teacher said, when you look for the mind, there's nothing to find. And the not finding is the finding. That's the insight to extract. When we look for the mind, there's nothing to find. It's not a thing. Expressed in another way, another text says the mind is, but it doesn't exist. We can't find it as an object. It's empty in that sense. There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening. That's the great mystery of awareness, of consciousness.

When you're sitting, this is something I've found very interesting to do in practice. I find it most easy to do, at least at first, with sound. When sound arises, the sound is known—we're hearing the sound. Occasionally you might just ask, or look: Can I find what is knowing the sound? In the experience of hearing, it's obvious that we're knowing the sound, because we're actually hearing it. In that moment of knowing the sound, it's like turning the attention with the question: Can I find what it is that's knowing it?

This is where it gets interesting. When we look, when we try to find what's knowing it, there's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening. If you just have moments of looking at the mind, there's nothing to find—just see if you get some sense of that, some taste of it. Because in the not finding of knowing or consciousness as a thing, it cuts through the tendency to identify with it. There's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening. That's the mystery and the challenge of this inquiry.

Just settle back. Get grounded in the awareness of the body. Continue your practice as you've been doing it.

Perhaps from time to time, just investigate your experience in terms of this pairwise progression—moment after moment, knowing and object, knowing and object, arising simultaneously. And if it's of interest, at some point you could experiment. Again, especially with sound, but it could be anything. With whatever the experience is, can you find what's knowing it?

Question from participant about whether the identification with "I" and "me" is innate or socially conditioned, and what would happen if one were raised in isolation.

The comment was about this addition of "I," "me," and "mine" to experience, and how that is very conditioned by society and how we're brought up. The question was: what would happen if one were brought up in isolation without that conditioning? Would the mind just be resting in natural awareness?

Given the Buddhist understanding of birth and death and rebirth—which you may or may not believe at this point—but as my first teacher Munindra would say, when he was talking about rebirth and the different realms of existence to Westerners, knowing that many were skeptical, he would say, "You don't have to believe it. It's true, but you don't have to believe it."

So given that framework, as Trungpa Rinpoche said when asked, "What is it that's reborn?" He replied, "Your neuroses." It's not that we come in with a pure blank slate. The very reason, the very cause within the Buddhist cosmological understanding—the very cause of rebirth—is craving and attachment. We're coming in with that. And again, it's over countless lifetimes that this conditioning has been built up.

Another question about knowing and experience, and whether accumulated experience constitutes identity.

I think one of the places people get caught up has to do with exploring and integrating the notion of two levels of truth: the relative level and what you could call the more ultimate level.

On the relative level—the conventional, ordinary way we relate to experience—there's "I," there's self, there's other. When we're doing metta meditation, we're not saying, "May the five aggregates which are arising in you be expressive of loving-kindness towards other five aggregates." That whole understanding of selflessness—that it's just the play of the aggregates, that it's impersonal—that's on one level. On another level, the relative level, here's Joseph, there's you. We relate with Joseph as a certain identity with a certain history of experience. These two levels are happening together.

Let me see if I can do a show and tell here. What do you see? A tissue box? Actually, we don't see a tissue box. The eye does not see "tissue box." The eye sees color and form, and then the mind puts a concept on what we're seeing—"tissue box."

On the basic level of seeing, of just color and form, if we were really paying careful attention, we would see the flow of impermanence in that. But as soon as we put the concept "tissue box" on it, the concept

remains the same. Tissue box today, tissue box yesterday, tissue box tomorrow. Even if we know that it's just seeing color and form—or to put it another way, if we could see microscopically, there'd be no tissue box, just atoms and electrons—it would be a whole other level of reality where tissue box disappears.

The fact that it's possible to see an underlying level of reality, the tissue box-less reality of this, doesn't mean that we also don't relate to it on the relative level of tissue box. It's here, and if I need a tissue, I'll reach down and take one.

So these two levels are not mutually exclusive. There is the conventional, relative level of self, of other, of identity—all of that is part of how we live in the world. But in underlying reality, you could say at the subatomic particle level, there is the selfless nature of it. The more we tune into that level as well, the less attachment there is to the conventional level. We operate in the world with ordinary concepts, but if we have insight into the underlying reality, then we're not caught by the relative level.

Question: I'm trying to understand the "so what" of all this. We're all here to try to figure out how to live better lives. Impermanence, all that dukkha—it's always been tricky for me, but you've done a great job today and yesterday of explaining it in a way I've never thought about before. From yesterday's teaching, my takeaway is: don't take it so personally, it's not about you, get over yourself. But what are we to take from this whole separation of the known—

It's not the separation, it's the distinction.

—how do we take that lesson and apply it to our lives?

The "so what" of beginning to be with experience in this frame—this more ultimate frame, not the conventional one—is really seeing that all that's there in each moment is this process of an object arising, one of the six sense objects being known.

Now, many of you may think, in the course of the week or the nine days, that your mind and your life are quite complicated. But it really isn't, because only six things ever happen. Everything that we think of as a great big complicated life—it's only six things. It's either seeing, or hearing, or smelling, or tasting, or feeling a sensation in the body, or some mind object of thought or emotion. The five senses and the mind.

When we really drop into the experience, the flow of experience moment after moment, we see it's only these six things in different combinations happening very rapidly. We put it all together like the frames of a film going very quickly—we don't see that they're just separate frames. And so a whole story is created because we haven't really seen carefully the nature of this process of what we call our lives. It's only these six things, ever.

But if we're not paying very careful attention to that process, we experience those six things in different patterns, and they create a whole story, and then we're living in the story of our lives with all the attendant joys and sorrows and complications.

So the "so what" of beginning to see this experience—what we're calling "Joseph" or "life"—seeing it in this way enables us to drop back into experience with much greater ease and simplicity. And then, as different thoughts and emotions arise, we've talked about this a little: to see that the thought is essentially empty, there's not much power in the thought. The only power is the power we give it.

The same thing with emotions. Emotions are powerful, vivid experiences. Can we be with them just as they are, seeing the conditioned, impermanent nature of them? Or are we collapsing into the story of them?

The more we see the emptiness, the selflessness of the process, the more it enables us to be with experience and, on a relative level, discern which of these experiences are worth cultivating. Which thoughts should I follow? Which emotions should I cultivate? Which thoughts should I let go of? Which emotions are not that skillful and can be abandoned?

If we hold the belief that each one of these experiences is who I am, then it's a problem, because there's a mix of wholesome and unwholesome. If we're identifying with all of that, beginning to see the unwholesome aspects can so easily lead to self-judgment and guilt—"I'm such a terrible person." This was certainly my experience in the very beginning of my practice. I saw the whole range of my mind until I began to see more deeply: that's all empty, it's all selfless. And that understanding gave the space then to discern which experiences to respond to, which simply to let go of.

So it provides that greater space and ease with which to engage in the world.

Question: I often think of the brain as a receptor, with this communication constantly flowing back and forth. I can never move beyond this idea of my brain as a receptor of information, giving information back and forth. I often see my body as just this antenna.

This is a totally reasonable question, especially given our scientific paradigm for understanding life and the world. Just a couple of things.

If you're proceeding with the belief that brain and mind are the same thing, you could mostly come to the same understanding of selflessness—as long as you don't assume it's *your* brain, that there is a brain doing these things. So even within that context, it's possible to understand the selfless nature of it all. It's all an impersonal process.

From the Buddhist perspective, there is a distinction between mind and brain, and the brain becomes the physical basis for consciousness to arise. For example, thought is immaterial—it's not a material object, it's mental. But it arises out of certain electrical impulses in the brain. The thought is not the electrical impulse; the electrical impulse is the condition for the thought to arise. You could work with it in both of these ways, and in either case, in whatever way you're holding it, you can still be seeing the impermanent, selfless nature of it all.

The purpose of the practice is not necessarily to create some new philosophic or metaphysical system—that's not the purpose. The purpose is to see things in such a way that deconditions grasping, deconditions clinging. The cause of suffering in our lives, in the most fundamental way, is clinging or craving for things, for experiences in this whole unfolding process—craving or clinging to things which in their very nature are going to change. Because of that, if we're attached, we suffer. If we're attached to youth, we suffer in old age. If we're attached to summer, we suffer in winter. If we're attached to things staying this way, we suffer when they change.

The freedom lies in just being in the process—sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant. It doesn't mean everything always becomes pleasant, but the mind is free in the experience of both because we're not identifying, we're not adding that extra layer, we're not clinging, we're not attached. That's the essence of it. Even within Buddhism, the different traditions have different metaphysical systems describing it all, but it all comes down to the mind that does not cling. That's where the freedom is.

The practice and all the suggestions of method and philosophy and Buddhist teaching—they're all directed toward that point. It was expressed in one sutta where the Buddha says, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine." Whoever practices this practices all of the teachings. It all comes down to that point.

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