Reflections on Non-Self (Anattā)

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:04:36

So many aspects of the Buddha's teachings about the nature of suffering and the possibilities of freedom resonate easily with our common sense understanding of ourselves and the world. For example, the importance of non-harming as the basic moral principle of living together in community, whether it's local communities or the global community. The understanding that all things in our lives are changing, inside and outside, and that if we're attached or grasp at that which in its very nature changes, then we suffer.

In some sense, this is very obvious. If we're attached to youth, we suffer. If we're attached to summer, we suffer in the winter. If we're attached to what's pleasant, then we suffer when things get unpleasant. This is obvious: if we're attached to that which in its nature changes, there's going to be difficulties. All of this really seems quite obvious, I think, to most of us, even if we're not always living that understanding—but it's not difficult to understand.

There's one aspect of the Buddha's teaching, though, that offers a profoundly different perspective on things, a profoundly different view of ourselves and the world. It's one that really challenges our entire worldview. And that is the deep understanding and realization of what in Pali is called anattā—translated sometimes as non-self, or selflessness, or emptiness, emptiness of self. Realizing anattā is in some ways the great liberating jewel of the Buddha's teaching.

Over the years I've given a lot of talks and written a lot about how this view of self is created in the mind, how the mind constructs this idea of self and how it sustains it. But tonight what I'd like to do is offer something of a collage of reflections and practices that might help us—even briefly—to actually touch into the realization of it, so that we can experience a real taste of what selflessness means.

The first important understanding is that the self is not some existing thing that we need to get rid of. Our practice is not about getting rid of the self because it's not there in the first place. The whole notion of self is an idea, it's a view, it's a perspective that we bring to our experience. It's not some thing that's residing within us. And of course, the Buddha talked of this view of self as being wrong view.

One of the great Tibetan meditation masters of the last century, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, was a teacher to His Holiness the Dalai Lama—just an amazing teacher, and his writings are crystal clear. This is what he said about this: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in the realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others."

In some sense our whole practice is really geared towards the understanding, or the means, for letting go of this view of I, this view of self. The Buddha offered a very brief, succinct, and clear practice for doing this. This was advice that he gave to his son, Rahula, after Rahula had become a novice monk. He said: See everything with perfect wisdom. This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.

Maybe this one simple instruction would be enough if we could remind ourselves of it as we ride the roller coaster of our life experience. Thoughts arise—not mine, not I, not myself. Difficult sensations arise—not mine, not I, not myself. Different mind dramas, different emotions—not mine, not I, not myself.

But as we know, although these instructions are so simple and clear, not difficult to understand, they're not easy to apply when we're caught up in the forward momentum of our lives. In the midst of our daily lives, how often do we remember to apply that instruction? Not mine, not I, not myself. Probably not that often.

One exercise that I found very helpful in beginning this experiential exploration of selflessness is what I call "from am to is." I first played with this when I came across a teaching of Ledi Sayadaw, who was one of the great Burmese meditation masters. He lived at the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s, and was very renowned. In this teaching, he listed some of the variations of wrong view—a whole list of wrong view—and the list startled me.

This was what was on the list of wrong view: I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm angry, I'm excited, I'm afraid, I'm bored. What was startling to me when I read this was that all these phrases were simply the common expressions of how we live. It's just so common—we're speaking with someone, saying, "Oh, I'm angry today" or "I'm happy today" or "I'm this or that." And it's not the emotions or mind states themselves that are the wrong view. It's the "I am." The mind has co-opted these arising experiences and claims them as being I or mine.

So it was very striking to me to see that just our ordinary way of understanding ourselves and communicating what we're experiencing—wrong view is embedded right in that.

The first step I found helpful in this journey from "am" to "is" was to really look at and watch out for the felt experience of "I am." Just throughout the day, whether in formal meditation or simply moving about, there might be the felt sense of "I am" in walking. We're just walking, even just going for a walk, and mostly there's that internalized feeling of "I'm walking." Or as we're having different emotions, we can focus attention on what it feels like when we're experiencing it as "I'm angry," "I'm happy," "I'm sad," "I'm excited." Or other mental activities: "I'm thinking," "I'm planning," "I'm judging." You can make your own list of where the "I am" feeling is most predominant.

What's interesting about this is that since "I am" is really the default setting of our minds, almost any time we look, we can feel it. It's not like you have to be on the watch for some rare, esoteric arising. It's how we're mostly just living and feeling. But very rarely are we paying attention to what it feels like—that's

just what we take ourselves to be. So the first step is simply tuning in from time to time to what it feels like.

Then make the move. Once you're feeling "I'm thinking," "I'm judging," "I'm walking," "I'm moving," "I'm doing this," "I'm doing that"—in whatever moment you tune into the "I am"—just make a little mental shift to "there is." There is walking. There is thinking. There is planning. There is judging. There is all of those same physical or mental activities.

What I noticed was very striking, and in a way very obvious. In the "I am" mode, when I tuned into how it felt, there was a contraction. It was kind of like being imprisoned in the "I am." And as soon as my mind made this simple shift to "there is"—from "I'm walking" to "there is walking"—right in that moment I could feel a greater spaciousness, a letting go of the contraction of "I am."

This is very immediate feedback. And it's not hard to feel. We just have to look and pay attention to it.

One way you might experiment with this—something we've been talking about all week—is using the instruction "there is a body" in sitting practice. I found that phrase very useful in walking as well, especially at a more normal speed. So just walking, instead of "I'm walking," using the phrase "there is a body" makes the mind a little broader just from doing that. Then walking and seeing what is being experienced. Within the framework of "there is a body," what's actually being felt are simply sensations in space. The notion of body actually disappears, even though we're using the phrase to ground us. As soon as we do that and start walking and feeling what's arising, it's just sensation in space without any form, without any sense of a solid body. And that, again, becomes a very easy doorway into feeling the selflessness of it all. It's just sensations being known.

Although these are very simple exercises, a way of just stepping out of the contraction of "I am," they have profound implications. The Buddha said, "By rightly understanding 'I am,' one makes an end of suffering. The eradication of 'I am' is the attainment of Nibbāna here and now."

This is not an insignificant move. But what's surprising is that we're just not really paying attention to it. So this exercise, from "am" to "is"—if you're interested, just play with it in the course of a day. Notice the contraction of our usual way of being in the world, the "I am." I'm doing this, I'm doing that, I'm feeling this, I'm feeling that. And in those moments when you feel that, shift to "there is" and notice the difference.

That's one little exercise you could do in terms of exploring the experience of anattā. The second exercise is what I call "dreaming oneself into existence." This has to do with setting the intention to be aware of the quickly passing thoughts in the mind—not the loud, demanding ones, not the problematic ones, not the big stories, just the almost endless stream of quick thoughts that mostly we're not aware are happening. We don't pay much attention to them because they don't seem very problematic. It's just like a sound arising and passing.

One time on a self-retreat, I started noticing some of these quickly passing thoughts. It reminded me of an

experience I think is common to many of us. Do you know that moment sometimes when you first wake up in the morning, and if you don't just jump out of bed, you might go back into a dream state for a minute or two, then wake up again? When I was watching these quickly passing thoughts, I realized it was the same experience. When these thoughts come and we're unaware of them, it's like we're going along—mindful, mindful, mindful—and then one of these thoughts passes through, not aware of it. In the moments of that thought, it's like dropping into a dream state for those few moments. Then it's like we wake up and we're mindful again.

So when I noticed this, I began to look a little more carefully at the content of those very seemingly innocuous thoughts. Again, these are not the big dramatic ones. These are just the quick ones, the light ones. But what I saw was that the content of these thoughts very often revolved around some sense of "I am." Maybe it's just a quick thought of a plan, or a judgment, or a like, or a dislike.

I realized that by not paying attention to these many quick thoughts, these many light thoughts, I was dreaming myself into existence. Because each of those moments of unawareness was like settling back into a dream. And even though they were quick and light, for each of those moments that the mind was lost in them, the mind was being reconditioned in one way or another. It was having an effect, but because it wasn't obvious, it was ignored.

Then it became, for me, a lot of fun. Going through the whole day, I set the intention: okay, just keep an eye out for these. And it was so interesting. Many times, because I had set the intention, I actually could catch them and be aware that they were there. And then, of course, many times I missed it and was only aware as I came out, realizing I was just lost in a thirty-second dream, and then out. It was very engaging for the mind and very liberating, because it was freeing the mind from a lot of these small moments of "I am." And so again, there was that taste of the selflessness of it all, of freedom from that. From "am" to "is"—dreaming oneself into existence.

The next two reflections around selflessness really have to do with the relationship of craving and desire to the sense of self. In one sense it's quite obvious: when we're caught up in craving or desire, there usually is a very strong sense of "I'm wanting something." That sense of self is usually very strong in moments of craving, which is why I gave the whole talk on craving and the end of craving and how to really touch that.

Two reflections that were in some way transformative in my practice arose in some of my self-retreats over these last couple of years.

In one retreat I was just sitting, and one of the teachings of the Buddha, which I had read countless times and you're probably very familiar with—just one line that appears a lot in the different suttas—arose. It says, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." That's a statement that sometimes becomes the song of enlightenment. When people get enlightened in the suttas, often they will say, "And I realized that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Sometimes that teaching prompts awakening.

So people hear that and think, "Okay, we'll try it once." Just listen, take it in: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

I was on retreat, in sitting meditation, and that thought came to me. But it came in a different way. Instead of my reading it and thinking, "Yeah, yeah, that seems clear," that thought—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—because it arose in my mind while sitting, it actually became part of the sitting. And the implication of that understanding, that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, is that there is nothing to want. Because whatever we want will also just pass away.

This was applied specifically in this context to the meditative process itself. The other night I was talking about the craving for becoming and how that creeps into our meditation, where we're kind of leaning into the next moment, thinking that somehow we're here but as it becomes this, somehow it'll be resolved—not realizing there's just another next moment that will also pass away.

To drop this right into the middle of your sitting: you're in the process, you're in the flow of things arising and passing, you might call this phrase to mind—whatever has the nature to arise, right in our meditative experience, whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.

In that moment when my mind really grokked the implication of that—because everything is going to arise and pass away, there's nothing to want—I could feel the mind drop back, just for a few moments, into not wanting. Not wanting anything. Not wanting the next moment, not wanting more concentration, not wanting to be more mindful. Just not wanting.

That was an amazing moment. That was really a taste, even briefly, of the third noble truth. The Buddha talked about suffering as the first noble truth, the dukkha; the cause of dukkha, which is craving; the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving.

Before, I was undertaking my practice with the idea that, yeah, maybe in thirty years or five lifetimes, I'll reach the end of craving. It was like the far-off goal. I could understand it, but it seemed quite distant. And then at a certain point I realized: yes, the final eradication of craving might take a couple of weeks. But we can actually experience the end of craving for a moment at any time at all. We can actually taste it. We can touch it.

We can feel it. We can experience it. And it's really profound—there's nothing to want. You can just feel the mind drop back. It drops back into peace. You can say it drops back into emptiness. It drops back into selflessness, into openness, into not wanting.

For me, this was a moment that has stayed with me, and I use it in my practice now. From time to time, I remind myself of this and feel that connection to the experience of not wanting. And in that not wanting anything, there is no "I am" at all. There's no sense of self at all. It's really a moment of peace. It's a moment of completion. Even though it's just for a moment or two, it's real. I would really encourage you to play with that and to touch that. It's not hard to do. It's just remembering.

In the same vein of experiencing the selflessness of non-craving, of not leaning forward, I think it was mentioned earlier—the lump of foam. The Buddha gave five images for the different aggregates, which comprise the mental and physical phenomena. He called the body like a lump of foam—not foam rubber, but foam on water. And then feeling was bubbles in a stream. Perception is like a mirage. All mental formations are like a plantain tree or a banana tree—the trunk has no core to it. The trunk is just concentric leaves, so when you go to the center, there's nothing there. The center is empty. And then consciousness as a magic show.

I had read these images many, many times, but I always took them as just similes, as description rather than instruction. Then on one retreat, it came to mind because I had read it so often. So I took it as an instruction, because sometimes images are very powerful.

I'd be sitting, feeling the body, feeling the flow of sensations, and "oh, the body's like a lump of foam." And that was just what it felt like—the bubbling of different sensations arising and passing. But again, there was a further implication: the body will never be anything else but a lump of foam. So there's nothing to want.

I've seen in my own practice and with many yogis—so often we're feeling the sensations, feeling them so that they become something else. We're feeling some tension, so the tension releases. We're feeling some tightness or unpleasantness, so we can open it up or whatever. But whether there's tension or not tension, it's still a lump of foam. And it will always be just a lump of foam.

When I realized this through that image, the whole system relaxed. There's nothing to become, because it's not going to become anything different in that respect. Just as with "there's nothing to want" because whatever arises will pass away, the feeling of the body is just a lump of foam. This is the nature of the experience of the body. We don't need for it to become anything different than it is, because whatever we think it should become is still that same old lump of foam.

It had that same effect—the mind dropping back into not wanting. The reason I'm emphasizing all of this so much is that I've seen so clearly how craving for becoming, right in the meditation practice itself, is so strong. It's just some wanting of something. But that wanting keeps us bound on the wheel of changing phenomena.

And the freedom is in not wanting—the third noble truth, the end of craving, even if only for a few moments. We can touch that, we can taste it and feel the peace of it. From "I am" to "is," dreaming oneself into existence—there's nothing to want.

Another place where the "I am" becomes very strong is in our attachments to our views and opinions about things. We have views and opinions about almost everything. And to a large extent, we have views and opinions about things we know nothing about. But this does not stop the mind.

I'll tell you one story of this because it was so striking to me, and it was incredibly freeing when I realized

this tendency towards attachment and clinging to views and opinions. This goes back to when I was teaching at that first summer institute of Naropa in 1974—it was like a Buddhist Woodstock. This was the first gathering of several thousand people who came from all over the country and different parts of the world. Ram Dass was teaching, Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching—it was this big spiritual happening. Quite amazing.

I was teaching meditation at that summer school, and in fact, this whole Vipassana momentum started right there. From teaching there, people began inviting us—would you come teach a retreat in South Carolina, or in Wisconsin—just all over the country. It was a very grassroots unfolding.

While I was teaching at Naropa, there was a visiting Tibetan lama, one of the great, great Tibetan teachers: Dudjom Rinpoche. He was the head of one of the great lineages and revered, really, as a great enlightened master. I saw a poster for a talk that he was giving, and somewhere on the poster it said something like "Dudjom Rinpoche, incarnation of Sariputra." I'm not sure I'm quoting it exactly, but that was the basic message. Sariputra was the chief disciple of the Buddha, second only to the Buddha in his awakening and enlightenment.

From the Theravada Burmese understanding, arahants, enlightened beings, are not reborn. So I saw this poster and my mind went on tilt. Because on the one hand, here was this great enlightened being, incarnation of Sariputra, and on the other hand, that's impossible—Sariputra wasn't reborn.

In that state of trying to hold this, I came to a startlingly clear understanding: I had no idea whether he was the incarnation of Sariputra or not. I really didn't have a clue. All I knew was the Burmese think this is impossible; the Tibetans say he is. And I realized two things: that I didn't know, and that I didn't have to have an opinion about it.

Before that, I could easily have gotten into some big Dharma argument. "Oh no, that's impossible, definitely." How often do we do that? We get caught up in our views and our opinions and get into all kinds of conflicts. Sometimes it's about things we may know a little bit about, but very often it's about things we really don't deeply know. We've just been conditioned to have a view, an opinion.

It's so freeing to be able to say "don't know," and that I don't have to have a view about what I don't know. Again, it's the loosening of this contraction of self—my views, my opinions.

A corollary of this, which is a little different but in the same vein: a strong sense of self can arise especially in situations of conflict, where we're attached to being right. That's what's fueling our energy—"Well, in this situation, I'm right." I would really pay attention to those moments, because even if one is right in some particular context, the attachment to that, to "I'm right," is a contraction. We really are narrowing ourselves, and it makes real communication impossible.

Pay attention to those situations and see if it's possible to let go of that sense, that attachment to being right. There's an expression somewhat in vogue in spiritual circles: Would you rather be right or be free?

In those moments, if you pay attention to the difference, it's a no-brainer.

Perhaps the subtlest hideout of the sense of self, the one most difficult to see, is our identification with consciousness itself, with awareness itself. With practice—and many of you have been practicing for a while and probably have a pretty good sense, at least at times—different sensations come and go, thoughts come and go, and even big emotional dramas come and go.

We begin to get some sense that these are all impermanent in their flow, and maybe we get a sense of their impersonality—that they're arising out of conditions and passing away. But mostly, I think we have the sense, "Well, I'm the one who's knowing it all. I'm the one who's observing it." And in that identification with knowing, we have created the witness. We have created the observer.

So it's challenging and interesting to begin to play with ways of cutting through the identification with knowing, with awareness, with consciousness. There are a variety of ways of doing this—different techniques and methodologies for cutting through this subtle identification with the knowing. Different traditions have different techniques for it.

One approach is just a framework of understanding, and this really comes out of the Vipassana teachings. In every moment of experience, just two things are happening: knowing and an object. Knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, knowing of a smell, a taste, a thought. Our life, and really what we're calling self, is just this pairwise progression, moment after moment—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. Breathing in, there's the sensation of the in-breath and the knowing of it. Breathing out, there's the sensation of the breath and the knowing of it. The rise, the knowing of it. The fall, the knowing of it.

In every moment, that's all that's happening. There's the knowing and the object of the knowing. When we settle back in that understanding, then we can settle into just this flow of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, realizing that there's no one behind it to whom it's happening. Who we are is this pairwise progression. And in fact, this is what life is. Our whole life is this.

In the teachings of Vipassana, this understanding, this insight, is not some deep esoteric truth. This can be understood and experienced quite early on in one's practice. It's very accessible. It's just having the understanding, maybe, to begin to frame your experience in this way. Notice how in each moment, whatever the experience is—a thought, a sound, a sensation, a breath—whatever it is, there's the knowing and the object. Knowing and object. Knowing and object. This insight is called in this tradition "purification of view," because in that experience we see that there is no self behind it. It's not happening to anyone. What we are is this process. So this is one very direct way of experiencing anattā.

There's another way also. And as you hear all of this, just to the extent that you can remember any of it, I really offer it as something to explore in your practice. Whichever one of these, or several of them, resonates or feels interesting, really apply it. Because the only value of this will be in your applying it. It's not just in hearing it.

So here's another experiment which I really have enjoyed doing. It's really a thought experiment. And I began to value the power of thought experiments when I read a recent biography of Einstein by Walter Isaacson—it was a great book. He describes a lot of Einstein's amazing discoveries. Einstein wasn't an experimental physicist. His insights all came as thought experiments, and then the mathematics around it. So I had my own little Einstein moment. That may be a little grandiose, but it was something.

In the teachings, in the Abhidharma, it describes what conditions are necessary for the arising of seeing consciousness or hearing consciousness. There's a very clear description: these particular causes are there, these conditions are there, then seeing consciousness will arise. For that to happen, it's said that we need four things. We need an eye that is in working order. We need light. We need attention. And something has to come into our field of vision. If those four conditions are present, seeing consciousness will arise. We'll know the sight. The eye, light, attention, and something crossing.

So I was just walking around the loop...

And I was just playing with my mind, as I like to do. So I made a little experiment, because I was seeing. As I was walking, I was just seeing. So I had this thought experiment: Well, would I be seeing if there was no light? I just took different conditions away in my mind. If there was no light, I couldn't see anything. Or if there was no eye, I couldn't see anything.

So right in that moment, and just for that moment, it was so clear—the conditioned nature of consciousness. Consciousness is not something that's always there. Moment after moment, very, very rapidly, consciousness arising and passing, arising and passing, dependent on conditions. You take a condition away, that particular consciousness is not going to arise.

And so again, it cut through the identification with consciousness as being I, as being self, as being a mind. It's just the result of these conditions. Take a condition away, it's gone. You can try it. It's the same thing with hearing consciousness. It's the same with all the senses.

Now we're shifting gears to how this could be approached from another tradition, but I want to back up a little bit. In meditative experience and in different traditions, consciousness or awareness is described in different ways. In some traditions, it's really described as this momentary arising and passing, arising and passing, as I described. In other traditions, awareness is described more as a field—and sometimes in instructions you might find that kind of language: things arising in awareness, as if awareness is the field in which things are happening.

These are just different—you could say metaphysical—descriptions of the experience of awareness. It reminds me somewhat of how light can be described as either a wave or a particle, depending on how it's observed. So rather than getting caught in thinking one is right and one is wrong, it's just that sometimes we have the experience of awareness as being a field, and sometimes we experience it by really seeing its momentariness.

In both cases—and this is why that distinction is not so important—in both cases the necessity is to find some way of not identifying with it. This becomes in some sense easier if we're seeing the momentariness, because then it's clear: it's just arising and passing moment after moment. It's a little more difficult to not identify with the field, but there are ways to do it.

There's one very famous Zen exchange where Bodhidharma, the great master who brought Buddhism from India to China, was living in his cave and facing the wall for nine years. Then this man—the spelling is H-U-I-K-E, and my Chinese is a little rusty—but he became the great disciple of Bodhidharma. So Huike comes to Bodhidharma and is tormented. He's in a lot of suffering. At first, Bodhidharma just dismisses him. But Huike pleads, "Please, please help me."

This is the dialogue. It's just a few lines, and the last line is a moment of realization—but often people hear it as a Zen witticism and see, in a way, the humor or whatever. Don't listen on that level, because it's saying something very profound. Try to listen to it on that deeper level.

Huike comes to Bodhidharma and says, "I'm in so much suffering. Please pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind and I'll pacify it."

Huike says, "I've looked for it everywhere. I've looked for my mind everywhere, and I can't find it."

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

Right there. And this is also in some of the Tibetan teachings, in the Dzogchen teachings. One of the exercises they have people do is to look for your mind. Can you find your mind? You look for it, and there's nothing to find. As one of the great Tibetan teachers said, "The not finding is the finding." That's what's to be realized—that it can't be found.

I really use that little dialogue in my practice. Especially when I'm caught up in something, when the mind is just upset in some way or other, I'll remind myself of this. Can I find my mind? There's nothing to find. Already pacified.

At this point, I just need to use that short phrase—"already pacified"—because I'm so familiar with the dialogue. Already pacified. It's amazing: just by realizing the unfindable, selfless nature of the mind, immediately in that moment we can rest in peace.

There is a technique or exercise that I have found really helpful in highlighting this aspect. In the course of our practice—and I'll be talking about a kind of linguistic construction—usually in our life and our experience, we language it to ourselves in the active voice. "I'm doing this, I'm going there, I'm whatever." There's a subject, verb, object.

At one point I started reframing experience in the passive voice, and I did this particularly in walking meditation. I was just walking, and instead of the sense of "I'm walking," I reframed the way I was

experiencing it through this passive voice: sensations being known. So it's not "I'm knowing the sensation"—it's sensations being known.

There's a lot embedded in that. First, that linguistic construction of the passive voice takes the subject out of the picture. Sensations being known—as soon as we drop into that perspective, already the sense of self is gone. All that's there is sensations being known.

When I was doing this, so much was revealed. In the course of a simple step—just play with this: if you move your arm for a moment, with that frame, just feel the sensations being known. It's effortless. It's completely effortless. There's no one doing anything. Sensations are just being known, and the different sensations of the movement are being known perfectly and exactly—not a moment before, not a moment after. They're just being known.

Going through the whole day within this framework became so easeful. Throughout the whole day, it was just different things being known, arising and being known. No one's there doing anything.

For me, this completely changed the walking meditation in particular, because the movement is so clear and obvious. You're just walking and the sensations of the movement are being known. It's very easy to get into that framework. If it interests you at all, I would just experiment with it and play with it. At whatever point, it just becomes natural and easeful. There's nothing special here. There's nothing you have to look for. It's just things being known. It's so simple and so easeful.

If you do decide to play with it a little and you drop into that place of ease, then you could ask a further question. Once you're just in that rhythm—okay, so there are just sensations being known—then you could drop in the question: Known by what? Just "known by what?" There's nothing to find.

This is the great mystery of consciousness. There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening. It's quite remarkable. What's so interesting is that it's so easy to go through our whole life and never even be investigating this very basic aspect of what it means to be alive, to have experience, what consciousness is. Our whole practice just opens these doors.

The Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein had a great line about this which is very relevant to our practice. He said, "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar. Our language so conditions our understanding. That's why this simple little play of going from active voice to passive voice—the grammar changes, the experience changes. It really is a doorway into understanding the empty, selfless nature of our lives, our experience.

I can't let a retreat go by without mentioning my favorite story of the Big Dipper, which I've been talking about for the last forty years. The Big Dipper is up in the sky.

I'll spare you the whole story. Clearly, there's no Big Dipper in the sky. It's a concept. We see a certain pattern and we put a concept on it: Big Dipper.

When we realize that there's no Big Dipper, that it's just our own mental construct, does anything change in the sky? Everything is exactly as it always was. You could think of the concept "Big Dipper" as being analogous to the concept of self. The concept of self is a construct. There is a certain pattern of mental and physical elements. We see the pattern, just like we see the pattern of stars. We put a concept on it: self, I, "this is me." But in realizing that it's just a concept, everything is exactly the same. It's just that we're seeing it differently, seeing it more clearly. And so then we operate in our lives from a much wiser place.

I'd like to close with two little teachings, both from Tibetan teachers. One highlights the importance of understanding that even though the depth of our practice, the liberating power of it, is to see and understand the selfless nature of it all—that experience is not happening to anyone, but rather what we call self is the process, this changing process—it's also important to understand that on a relative level we can use the concept of self. The conventional way we understand things, the way we language things, the way we talk to one another—on that conventional level, it's fine to use this notion.

So this little teaching points to that: "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerate it."

I like that because yes, we're real in the conventional way that we all know, and that's fine. But we have to get to that other place of realizing we're not *really* real in that way.

This last piece is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and it points to the connection between the realization of selflessness and love and compassion, because these two are intimately related. He said:

"When you realize the true emptiness of phenomena, you will spontaneously feel an all-embracing compassion for all beings who are immersed in samsara's ocean of suffering because they cling to the notion of an ego. This troublesome ego, this sense of self, which is so concerned about itself, has in reality never begun to exist, it does not exist now, and so it cannot cease to exist. It's not there in the first place, so it's not something we have to get rid of. Not the slightest trace of it can be found. When you recognize this empty nature, therefore, any notion of there being an ego to dissolve vanishes."

So it's not that we have to get rid of it. And at the same time—and this is the line that just resonates so deeply—in realizing the selfless nature, "the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

I find that such a powerful and resonant teaching. The more we let go of this self-centeredness on the most fundamental level, that sense of "I am," the more we let go of that or see through it, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless.

This is our practice. This is what we're doing here.

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