Q&A with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:12:28

Good evening, everyone.

So tonight, it's my privilege and honor to introduce Joseph Goldstein, who is, in case you don't know, one of the founders of this place, a teacher of all of us here on the teaching team, and a great guy. The format for this evening: there were so many questions, a lot of great questions—probably forty or fifty of them—so we clearly aren't going to get to them all. I will be reading the questions for Joseph, and in a couple of instances I've combined two or three.

I think we'll launch right in. So the first question I have chosen is, dear to my heart: how about some tips on walking meditation?

First, just to say it feels delightful to be here with you all. I haven't been teaching the three-month course for a number of years now, so it's always great to kind of drop in, at least for an evening like this.

In terms of the question about walking, I think the first thing I want to say is that very often people have created an internal hierarchy about the importance of various aspects of the practice. For many people, sitting is at the top, walking is next, and everything else is a distant third. Just as an experiment, maybe for half a day or a day, it might be interesting to reverse the order and give primary importance to all the other activities in the day—giving the same attention to those as you do to sitting, and then walking, and then sitting. This doesn't mean you shouldn't come to the sitting. But for me, the walking practice has been equally insightful, and some of the most interesting insights have happened in the walking. So this is all by way of giving it a plug.

One of the reasons walking is so helpful is that in many ways, it carries over the most into your life in the world, because we're moving around a lot. My experience has been that having done thousands of hours, countless hours of walking practice over these many years, mindfulness of taking a step almost becomes the default. Just from having done it so much, out in the busyness of the world—I just came back from a few days in New York—walking down the street, if we've established the habit of being mindful in walking, it's right there in the midst of our daily life. So walking plays a really important role.

Now, some tips. One of the biggest ones—and maybe some of the other teachers have expressed this already—for me there was a huge shift in the walking which had to do with how I was languaging it to myself. Often in the language we use for meditation instructions there's a lot of watching language: watch, notice, observe. This watching language, just in the way it suggests, makes it as if we're up here somehow

looking at something. That makes the walking a lot more difficult.

At a certain point in my practice—and it took years to somehow intuit this—I just changed to feeling language: to feel the movement rather than watching the movement or observing the movement. The feeling is from the inside. It's like dance or tai chi or yoga. We're much more embodied inside than if we're walking with the sense of observing it, because that's from the outside. Does this seem clear? As I said, maybe you've already heard this, but for me that was a really transformative moment.

As you're walking, and it doesn't take much—you don't have to have deep samādhi to make this switch—it's just remembering, as you're walking, to simply feel it. Let's do an experiment. If you would just move your arm and feel the movement. You might move it at different speeds and just feel it. Does it take any effort at all? It's so effortless and easeful and present, because feeling is from the inside. It's like we're already embodied. This just makes the practice a lot more enjoyable.

Another aspect, and this is more subtle: very often as we're walking, even as we are feeling the sensations of the movement and the touch, there's a subtle overlay of something in between an image and an idea of foot and leg. We're feeling, we're being mindful and feeling the movement, but very often there's just that overlay of moving the foot or moving the leg. We don't actually feel "foot" or "leg" because there's no sensation called foot. There's no sensation called leg. That's a concept we're overlaying on top of the actual sensations being felt.

The reason this is important—and it points to an even larger understanding—is the importance in our meditation of dropping from the level of concept to direct experience. The concept of foot, leg, body doesn't change. When the mind is attuned more to the concept than to the actual felt experience, we're not gaining insight into the momentary changing nature of things. Even as we're being mindful in the walking and connected somewhat to the actual sensations—movement, pressure, heaviness, lightness, whatever it may be—I found it really interesting just to keep an eye out for that overlay.

One very dramatic shift came in my walking from doing this—

At different times, I would start noting the elements rather than using "lift, move, place" or whatever noting technique you might employ. For example, I would simply note "air element" during the movement, and "earth element" as I touched down. Just "air, earth, air, earth."

I was struck by a very dramatic shift in understanding. When I was simply noticing movement and touch, there remained that slight overlay of "foot" or "leg"—all of this operating on an extremely subtle level. This almost automatically leads to a sense of "my foot" and "my leg." Right there is the beginning of the creation, the strengthening, of the sense of self, of "I."

But it's very unlikely, if you're noticing air element or earth element, that this would transform into "my air element" or "my earth element." That's simply not what the mind does. This was born directly out of my experience of practicing in this way. The mind dropped into a very vivid experience of selflessness.

As I'm sure has been discussed extensively over the past six weeks, for many people this teaching on non-self is the most counterintuitive. We live as a self—that's how we operate in the world. So this whole teaching on anatta really takes a lot of settling into and exploring. Yet in the walking, I found it became an immediate experience. That's all there is: just air, earth, air, earth. I would encourage you, if you're interested, to experiment with this. These were truly transformative aspects of my walking practice and led to a real depth of understanding.

I suppose the third helpful hint is simply: just do it. Don't shortchange the walking, because it offers tremendous benefits both in formal practice and in carrying over into our daily lives.

Question: Any suggestions for how to work with the comparing mind?

One of the things I love about these question-and-response sessions is that almost every question addresses something we've all experienced. It reveals our commonality. The particular storyline may differ, but the basic patterns in our minds are all the same. To me, that's one of the joys of practice—the more we understand ourselves and our own minds, the more we understand everybody else, because our minds really work in the same way.

Is there anybody here who has not experienced the comparing mind?

A couple of things to consider. First, recognize that comparing is a manifestation of what Buddhism calls mana—one of the defilements or unwholesome mental factors, generally translated as "conceit." But in English, "conceit" doesn't really capture what mana is, because this comparing can take many forms: we can feel ourselves better than, equal to, or less than others.

I've found it really helpful, when certain psychological or emotional patterns arise again and again—patterns that are deeply conditioned—to actually recognize the particular defilement or mental factor from which those thoughts emerge. So when the comparing mind appears and I see it, I like to use the Pali word: just "mana."

If we use an English word, labeling it as "comparing," it's quite likely that even in the naming and recognizing of it, there's a slight judgment—this is not good, this is bad. When I use the Pali word, it keeps the experience very impersonal. It's just this factor of mind doing its thing. There's much less sense of imbuing that pattern with selfhood, with "I." It's just mana. Just mana doing its mana-ing.

Let me share a story with you, because recognizing it in this way makes it remarkably simple to disengage. Last year, or perhaps the year before, I was doing a self-retreat at my house.

I don't know if you know of Bhikkhu Anālayo. He has a kuti down at the study center, and he was doing a self-retreat at the same time I was. For those of you who know him, he's really disciplined—a hardcore yogi, a great renunciate. I mean, he's full on.

So I was sitting in my house, knowing he was down there on retreat. And one afternoon, I was just

frittering away some time. I didn't even know what I was doing, but it was just wasting time. And then I had the thought, "I'll bet Anālayo's not doing this."

Then I started to get down on myself. "Oh yeah, he's such a good yogi, and I'm just..." But fortunately—and I think this is the fruit of many years of practice—it didn't take too long until I recognized, "Oh, that's just māna. That's just māna." And as soon as I recognized it for what it was, in this totally non-judgmental way, just seeing it's this factor doing this thing—"Oh, māna"—the whole thing fell away. And the whole emotional residue, the feeling bad, fell away.

So that kind of precise recognition of the particular defilements that are causing whatever the pattern is—you know, it's hugely helpful. And it's quick. The liberation from it is not a long process. We don't have to be in ten years of therapy to find out why we're doing so much comparing. "Oh, māna."

And interestingly enough, māna is one of the very last defilements to go. Even after we have uprooted desire and aversion—which would be at the third stage of enlightenment, a huge, huge accomplishment—māna is still there. So this is by way of saying: might as well make friends with it. Because it's going to be there, and it's going to come up in a lot of different ways.

But I found now—and this is also a hugely helpful mental frame—whenever I see it, I'm delighted, because I would rather see it than not see it. And on top of that, every time I see it, "Oh, māna," māna falls away. "Oh, I'm working on arahantship now." So it gives it an extra little boost of encouragement.

We can transform it into real understanding of how our minds are working and how we get caught and how we can be free. And it doesn't take much. That's the beauty of this. So don't make it more of a problem than it is.

Which is another whole teaching. My first teacher was Anagarika Munindra, a very quirky teacher, but a great teacher. And one of the phrases he used—I heard it thousands and thousands of times over the years—he would just say, "Be simple and easy about things. Just be simple and easy." I think that was one of the best teachings I got from him. Because we tend to exacerbate whatever is going on in our mind and build whole stories and self-judgment and comparing and all of that. But you see how easy it can be when we don't personalize it. It's just māna doing its thing. See it for what it is. Gone. Until it comes next time.

Even the practice itself seems to have the agenda of fixing. How do I untangle from this mind's deep belief and desperation to fix?

Well, I think in a way this ties into the last question, because even if we're not comparing ourselves with somebody else, we could be comparing ourselves with some idealization of where we think we should be.

So one thing would be to try this out: when you see that pattern arising of wanting to fix—and this would be an experiment because I have not applied it in this particular context, but as you raised the question, it seemed very similar—whenever you see the pattern arise of the fixing mind, maybe see that as māna.

Because you're comparing your present experience to what you think your experience should be. And it may be that simply recognizing, "Oh, that's māna again," allows the energy of that fixing mind to fall away in recognizing the particular mental factor that's giving rise to that thought.

There's another really important distinction—two different mind states that people often conflate, and because of that conflation, they can create a lot of suffering. It's understanding the difference between aspiration and expectation. For me, that's a really important distinction.

Aspiration—we can have an aspiration for lots of beautiful things: to become enlightened, or to become more compassionate, or more loving, or less judgmental. And the aspiration sets a direction. If that's our aspiration, then we learn one way or another what's the path that will lead to that aspiration.

Expectation is when we're holding on to an expectation that our current experience should be a certain way. And when it's not, then we feel frustrated or despondent or discouraged.

But we can have an aspiration without expectation. Where the direction is clear, we understand the path, but we understand the path is not just linear—it doesn't just get better and better and lighter and clearer. It's not like that, as you well know. It's up and down and up and down.

Even now, after all these years of practice, mostly it's just rolling along pretty smoothly. But sometimes I'll have a sitting and it's like I've never sat before. My mind's just going off on something or wandering a lot. And in the beginning, more toward the beginning, I'd get really upset by that. I'm putting all this effort in and look what's happening! At this point, I just know so well, having been through a million ups and downs in the practice—both from sitting to sitting, day to day, year to year. Sometimes just going through a really difficult, challenging time. And sometimes it's just going great.

So the more we realize that, then there's a lot more acceptance of whatever the current experience is, realizing that the path is not particularly about particular experiences. It's about how we're relating to whatever is happening.

If somebody came up to you and you just finished a sitting and they asked, "Well, how was your sitting?" Probably if you were concentrated and your body felt at ease and you were pretty mindful, you'd say, "I had a great sitting." And if you were sitting there having been restless and bored and your body hurt, you'd say, "That was a terrible sitting."

That's a completely erroneous assessment. Because it's not about pleasant or unpleasant, easeful or difficult. It's about how mindful we are of whatever it is. So if we're struggling and there's enough mindfulness to put a really big frame around that whole experience—discomfort in the body or the restless mind or whatever it is—and we're relating to it with mindfulness, with awareness, that would be a more skillful sitting than having a really easeful time and being attached to it.

Are you getting this? This is really hard because we are almost hardwired: pleasant is good and

unpleasant is bad. But from the point of view of liberation, that's a completely erroneous assessment.

And the Buddha gave one teaching that is so direct and challenging—it makes me sit up straight. He said, as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible.

Well, that's striking at some deep conditioning, because as I say, we're almost hardwired to just go for the pleasant and avoid the unpleasant. And here's the Buddha saying the free mind is like space that can contain everything—pleasant, unpleasant. Can we cultivate that equanimity and that awareness which is just with each of those experiences? And none of them are permanent. They're all part of the passing show.

So somehow, if you could hold all of this, I think it would help free the mind from that wanting some imaginary other experience than what we're actually having. Which is a lot of dukkha.

That's a lot of suffering. Even just if you can imagine energetically what the wanting mind feels like, that quality of wanting something, and then not wanting, just open. Can you feel the relaxation of that?

I know there are a lot of questions, but each question could be an hour. I just want to share another experience. This also happened during the pandemic. I was on self-retreat at home, sitting.

There's one line that we find often in the discourses, a line that people would hear and become enlightened, just hearing this one line. So listen carefully. People miss it because it's so simple. They miss the implication.

The line, which is repeated frequently, is: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

I was sitting, really into the practice, and I remembered this line. It came to mind, but rather than being something my intellect was considering, it wasn't so much up here. I could almost feel it embedded in the flow of my experience. I was there, sitting in the flow of changing phenomena, and then right from within it arose the recognition: oh, whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And it was very obvious that that's what was happening.

But then my mind articulated the import of that line. Things are just moving along. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And in my mind: therefore, there's nothing to want. This is in the context of the meditation practice, because whatever it is that I may be wanting is also going to pass away.

It was just one of those moments of dropping back from this deeply conditioned pattern of wanting, of craving. It's the second noble truth: the cause of suffering is craving, is wanting, even in a meditative sense. Something so simple—recognizing in the midst of your being, in the flow of phenomena, that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, and therefore there's nothing to want. I could just feel the mind drop back into a non-wanting, which is the essence of the practice.

I hope with some of these stories you can see that the formal practice we do in intensive retreats like this is like tilling the ground. We're preparing the soil, creating some degree of inner space and flexibility. When the ground is prepared, as you've been doing over these weeks, then these very simple teachings can really have a profound impact. The insight becomes so vivid.

Sometimes now I'll just use the phrase: oh, there's nothing to want. Even when I'm not aware of wanting being there, that phrase will come to mind, and I can feel myself relax back from a wanting I wasn't even aware of.

A simple example: one time I was just watching the breath, feeling the breath. There's nothing to want. And I realized that even in that simple feeling of the breath, I was with each breath wanting something—wanting a little more calm, wanting concentration, wanting something. Just that remembrance, nothing to want, and you can feel the mind open, feel it become more free.

These very pithy teachings can really be liberating.

Let me read a couple of questions that are closely related. "Since daily life unsettles the mind so much, is there really hope of awakening as a layperson? Or would one eventually need to devote their life fully to the path?" And: "Dear Joseph, what are the odds of waking up? Do we have a real chance?" And one more: "Who or what gets enlightened? What happens to that which gets enlightened after it's enlightened?"

So my new favorite definition of enlightenment is lightening up. And I've seen this over many years now—I've been practicing fifty years or so—and I can see that that's just what the process is. It's lightening up.

So what does lightening up mean? Through practice, and I'll speak a little more about what I mean by "through practice," we become less and less self-referential. Instead of everything revolving around the I and me and mine—what I want and what I like and what I don't like and all of that—the lightening up has to do, on a more superficial level we could say, with just not taking ourselves, our minds, so seriously. And on a slightly deeper level, it involves beginning to weaken the hold of the sense of self that is basically running all our lives until we begin to see through it.

Because that sense of self, that sense of I, is just what feeds the desire and the aversion. "I want this and I don't want that. I like this and I don't like that." It's all rooted in the sense of self. So over time and over years of practice, we begin to see through that sense of self and let go of it—because it's only the *sense* of self that's there. It's not that there *is* a self which is there. The sense of self arises because we're not seeing things correctly. So as we see things more clearly, the sense of self begins to diminish. And we get lighter. And our life becomes a lot simpler and easier.

To answer that first question, I think it's absolutely possible—if not to become an arahant or fully enlightened—to experience different stages of enlightenment, even very high stages, as a layperson. There are many examples of people who have done that. Perhaps one of our most beloved teachers was Dipa

Ma, this extraordinary woman from India who had a huge amount of suffering in her life and went on to realize high stages of enlightenment and of samādhi. And her mind was just amazing—as a layperson. She was a mother with a family. So it's definitely possible.

I think what for me has been the arena of lay life most fruitful in terms of the movement toward liberation has to do with the attitude we have toward experiences of suffering and distress in our lives, right in the midst of them. Whether it's relationships or the world—there's plenty of dukkha in the world now—or the condition of our bodies, we all, just as human beings, go through many times of dukkha.

Just as an aside, I recently came across a definition of dukkha. I read it online someplace, and I don't even remember who it was from. But they were defining dukkha, and I loved it. It said: "The inevitability of unwanted experiences." I love this because it just captures it. And it's so obvious, so obviously true. If we're alive, it's inevitable that we will encounter many unwanted experiences one way or another—externally, internally—which is basically a statement of the First Noble Truth.

But what I've found to be really interesting and so helpful and meaningful is to take those times when my mind was really distressed or suffering from one thing or another, and instead of looking to the external causes or assumed causes of what was making me suffer, I've come to a place now where whenever my mind is in a state of distress, it piques my interest—because I want to understand what's going on in my mind that's causing the suffering.

So I'm going to share a teaching that Sayadaw U Pandita gave. It's a very challenging teaching. You may have some reactions—a trigger warning, so to speak. You may be triggered. But I don't think you will be, once it's explained a bit.

He said: "We are one hundred percent responsible for our sufferings."

That's an amazing statement. We are one hundred percent responsible. It does not mean that we're responsible for some of the horrendous conditions that may arise in our lives due to other causes or other people. It's not about that. What it's saying is that how we relate to whatever suffering is present—*that* is what we are one hundred percent responsible for. And how could we not be? Who else could be responsible for how we are relating to what's happening?

And there are even stories, from the Buddha's time and also in current times—people might raise different objections, asking about extreme situations, people being tortured, these horrible, horrible situations. But there are some really inspiring stories of well-practiced people. The ones that come to mind at the moment are stories of some Tibetan lamas who were imprisoned in China—imprisoned, tortured, just really horrible conditions. But many of them, when they came out, would talk about how even in those circumstances, their minds didn't go to hatred, didn't go to aversion. They were taking responsibility for their own minds, even in that extreme.

Hopefully none of us will find ourselves in that kind of situation. But certainly, in the more ordinary

dukkha of our lives, I've found it incredibly insightful when my mind is suffering to take interest in it. What's going on? What am I holding onto? What am I pushing away? What am I not allowing? There's always something in the way we're relating to what's happening.

I'll share one story of this. It goes back about forty years—a long time ago—but it was a powerful experience. I had a really close friend who at one point did something that was a complete betrayal of trust. I don't know how many of you have experienced that feeling of betrayal, but it is a horrible feeling. It was so painful, so much suffering. This was somebody close to me.

I was on a self-retreat, and this experience was really surfacing—a lot of feelings and thoughts. But at a certain point, it piqued my interest. What is going on in this situation that's causing so much suffering? Because it felt like a knife in the heart.

As I investigated, and it took some time, I realized that for that knife to hurt, it needed a place to land. If I could let the knife go through... Basically, it lands on the sense of self. It hits that sense of "me." But if there's no place for it to land, it was totally okay. The suffering really disappeared.

Over the years, I've remained friendly with this person. We see each other occasionally, and I don't have any ill will. I see him more clearly now. But it was such a lesson—something can be so painful, yet the suffering is still our responsibility.

Is this making sense to you? Because it's really a powerful teaching. Lately I've been using this phrase to express its importance: don't waste your suffering. We waste it by drowning in it, by feeling sorry for ourselves, or by blaming other people or situations for it. That's a waste, and it creates more suffering.

But if we actually investigate it within ourselves, we are practicing the Four Noble Truths right there. At that point, it's not theoretical. We're in the suffering, we examine it, we see the cause, and we see the end. Right there, we're actually practicing this path of liberation.

This happens more in our life in the world than on retreat. That's why I wouldn't make a big distinction in terms of walking the path. Our life situation can sometimes provide really deep and transformative understandings—liberating understandings.

Did I answer all of the questions in that collection? I can't remember.

Here's another: "The Buddha's powers of changing people's perceptions or seeing their past lives—are we to take these at face value? I find my skepticism of this makes me question other teachings."

Well, this was really a challenge for myself and colleagues of my generation. Many of us practiced in India or Thailand, and in those cultures, the idea of rebirth and other planes of existence is simply part of the culture. It's not problematic. People grow up with it.

Hearing these teachings and then coming back to the West—of course, it's not part of our culture. Very

often, people are skeptical.

So it was challenging to know how much we should talk about rebirth, or whether to simply not address it at all.

For myself, when Munindraji would be talking about rebirth and the planes of existence, particularly the deva worlds, I loved it. I really liked it. But he would always, when teaching Westerners, say, "You don't have to believe this because believing it is not essential for awakening. You don't have to believe it. It's true, but you don't have to believe it." That was his approach.

I think quite happily, the whole path of liberation can be walked while practicing only those teachings which we can verify for ourselves. It does not require belief in the cosmology, true though it may be. So I would just take what's useful in the teachings. And those things that you don't believe or have questions about or doubt about, just put them aside.

What I would suggest with that, though—and this is a subtle point with important karmic implications, even though some people may not have much belief in karma either—is that there's a difference in how we hold our uncertainty. There's an expression, I think it was Coleridge, the poet, who used the phrase "the willing suspension of disbelief." Because we can be as attached to disbelief as we are to belief.

With things that we don't know, I think it's a much wiser frame to say, "I don't know," and just stay open in the not knowing, rather than declaring, "It's not true." Because saying "it's not true" implies that you know. And you don't know if you don't know.

The reason for this subtlety in terms of karmic implications is that to say something is not true—within the Dharma perspective, when it actually is true—is really just an expression of wrong view, which is an unhelpful mind state. To say "I don't know" is not wrong view. It's simply acknowledging that this is beyond my current level of experience. I think that's a very easeful way of taking the teachings that are useful, that you can relate to, that you can verify in your own experience, and simply staying open to whatever else is in the teachings that you don't yet understand or believe. Just keep an open mind.

The Buddha talked about different kinds of attachment—attachment to sense pleasures, to the sense of self—but he also talked about attachment to opinions and views. And it is quite remarkable how attached we can be to our opinions about things we know nothing about. Just look at our culture. People have a lot of strong views and opinions about things they know nothing about. But we do the same thing on whatever level. So that would be an interesting part of our own internal working to observe.

These might be the last questions. They're kind of related, so I'm going to read them both. "Dear Joseph, what has helped you most in difficult times? And what's your take, finally, after all these years with the Dhamma?"

They are related. As some of you may know—and I think this is not uncommon in the West among people

practicing in the Buddhist tradition—over a lot of years now, I've studied with many different teachers, mostly in the Vipassana tradition, but also a little bit in some Tibetan teachings, a little bit of Zen. So I have experience with a variety of traditions, but mostly with just a lot of different teachers.

And what's really important—for me, what has been important—is recognizing what's in common across all of these. Even though the methodologies are different, and the teachings may sound different, and even the metaphysics or basic philosophical frameworks are sometimes different. This came up very strongly for me, particularly having done a lot of Vipassana and then doing a little bit of Tibetan practice. The metaphysics—they were saying different things about the nature of enlightenment or the nature of awakening.

I felt really torn. These great teachers were saying this; these great teachers were saying that. And in my mind, I was really struggling with the question: who's right? It felt like my whole spiritual path depended on my answering that question.

I was tormenting myself. I was on a two-month Tibetan retreat, and a couple of things in there were just contrary to everything I'd been practicing for thirty or forty years. I was really struggling.

There's an image used by people practicing Zen, the koan method. The image they use is that working with a koan is like having a hot iron ball that you can't spit out and you can't swallow. You're just grasped by this koan. Well, for me, it was like a koan.

You know, the "who's right" became a koan. And I was really struggling and really suffering with that.

And then at a certain point, I realized it was the wrong question. It's not a question of who's right. I framed the resolution of that question—and this would refer to working with all kinds of teachers, even within one tradition, but different teachers, different methods, different methodologies—I framed the resolution in a phrase. Because I studied philosophy in school, so my mind is oriented in that way. The phrase that resolved it all for me was: metaphysics as skillful means, not as statements of truth.

So when I began to hear these different teachings, rather than framing which is true or which is right, I simply took the teachings as skillful means. Then the question becomes: skillful means for what? And here is where all the traditions of Buddhism are unified—skillful means for non-clinging. That's the essence of the free mind in all the Buddhist traditions, whether it's the Burmese or Tibetan or Thai or whatever. In the texts, there are many places where the Buddha says, "Liberation through non-clinging."

So then it becomes really simple. In hearing a teaching, if we put it into practice to some extent, we really want to see: Is this leading us to less clinging, less holding on, less attachment, or not? If it is, then it's serving us. And if it's not, then we're not on the path to greater freedom.

In a way it's really simple. And now when people ask me, "What practice are you doing? What tradition are you in?" I'll say, "I'm practicing not clinging." It's really simple. Although, again, as Munindraji would

say, it's simple but not easy. Because those are two different things. It's not complicated.

Going back to what I was talking about earlier in terms of not wasting your suffering—it's always about clinging to something. And the Buddha, the teachings... I'm in awe of the teachings and the Buddha. It's incredible to me how, with what profound clarity, he understood the nature of the mind and body, the nature of the cause of suffering, and the path to freedom. We have a hard time stringing five breaths together, and he understood all of the different mental factors and how they related to one another. The clarity of it is unbelievable.

This is one tiny little part of that clarity: non-clinging. He gave a whole list of the things we normally cling to, in case we're not exactly sure what we're clinging to. And it's pretty simple.

The most obvious one is clinging to sense pleasures. We're attached to pleasure—pleasant sights and sounds and feelings in the body and all the senses. So that's a place to look. Are we attached? Are we clinging to them or not? Has that become the motivating energy in our lives, to just accumulate more and more pleasant experiences? Which it is, I think, for a lot of people. So that's one arena to examine.

The second is attachment to views and opinions, as I just mentioned. It's not so much here where you're not communicating with one another, but when you go back into the world, for those of you who are leaving soon, it would be really interesting to watch in your discussions and conversations with people how often we are attached to our views and opinions.

The third level of attachment doesn't really affect us that much, I think, but was very much part of Indian culture at the time—attachment to rites and rituals as a vehicle for enlightenment. I don't think in our Western culture we have too much of that.

But the last one, and this is really what takes a lot of interest to explore, is attachment to the view of self. Because that's in a way just at the center of all the other attachments. And the doorway of understanding selflessness is hard. This takes time. Impermanence we can all understand and even experience without difficulty, and it's not hard to understand and experience dukkha. But selflessness really is counterintuitive. It takes a lot of interest to explore this.

The doorway to understanding it—and there are actually many—is that we can understand selflessness through a refinement of our perception of change. So the more we see, both in

Our understanding of selflessness begins to open up through our meditation practice, but also in our lives in general, simply by seeing the changing nature of everything. And this opening also comes through our experience of dukkha.

I want to offer one brief elaboration of what selflessness means, because it's the translation of the Pali word *anatta*, non-self. One of the manifestations or experiences of *anatta* is the ungovernability of phenomena. If there were a self, we could simply say, "Let me not have any more anger, no more desire,"

as if we were in control. But *anatta* means things are following their own laws. It's not happening chaotically—it's happening lawfully—but not based on our will. It's based on the appropriate causes and conditions for things to arise. When the causes are there, phenomena will happen. When the causes are not there, they won't. Things are ungovernable. That's one of the doorways into having a deep intuitive experience of the selflessness of this whole process.

I'll end with this small piece. One of the reflections that the Buddha suggested we do daily—that's how important he thought it was—is a reflection on the universality of growing old and sick and dying. The reflection is: whatever has the nature to grow old will grow old; whatever has the nature to grow ill will grow ill; whatever has the nature to die will die. And after each one, there's a tagline. It's the tagline which is the kicker: "And I am not exempt." Whatever has the nature to grow old will grow old, and I am not exempt. To grow ill, I am not exempt. To die, I am not exempt.

Now, intellectually we all know this, but we don't believe it. There's some deep feeling—I certainly see it in myself, and I imagine we all have it—that until it hits us in the face, we think we are exempt, or at least that we should be. So often I'll be on retreat, doing some walking, and all of a sudden my knee will start hurting. The immediate reaction is, "Why?" And then: I am not exempt. This is what happens.

Just that simple recognition—to drop into the ungovernability of phenomena, to see that things are happening due to causes, not because there's a self governing at all. When this understanding comes up in our daily lives, we are deepening our understanding of selflessness, of non-self, which is really a tremendously liberating understanding in our lives.

So maybe I'll leave you with two mantras: Don't cling. And I am not exempt. I think those will serve you well all the way to full enlightenment.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.