Joseph's Responses to Three-Month Yogis' Written Questions

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:05:59

Good to be with you all.

I had to sort through all your questions. I think some of you defied the one question per yogi rule, the conciseness rule, nevertheless. So I pulled out the ones that I think are probably most pertinent to what we're doing here right now on this retreat. If yours isn't directly included, practice with it.

The first question: Continuing to be in the present moment, is there a specific practice that is beneficial in preparing to die? And paired with it: What experiences have informed your view of rebirth? And related to that, as we get older, are there any practices you recommend to prepare for our death?

A couple of things come to mind. In terms of the actual practice—first let me back up. I don't remember my last death, so I'm not speaking actually from direct experience, but I'm just speaking from my understanding in this life, projecting forward.

It seems to me it's the same practice. How we relate to this moment without holding on, without pushing away, simply being mindful of what's there—this seems to me the exact process we'll need in the whole dying process. Particularly being on a retreat of this length, I think is really helpful because there's a chance to practice and develop and strengthen the quality of equanimity with respect to unpleasant experiences. None of us really know what the circumstances of our death will be, but there's a fair chance it'll be uncomfortable. So how are we with unpleasant feeling, unpleasant sensations? How are we with them now? And how we are with them now seems to me the best practice for the whole process of aging, illness, and death. So in terms of the practice, I don't really see much difference.

There is an additional practice, though, which I found to be hugely helpful in deconditioning the reactivity that may arise through the aging, illness, dying process. It's one reflection the Buddha suggested we reflect on daily—he felt it was that important. It's really simple. He said: Whatever has the nature to grow old, will grow old. Whatever has the nature to become ill, will become ill. Whatever has the nature to die, will die.

And the tagline is what I find most helpful: I am not exempt.

What's so striking to me as I've practiced with that—I can be going for a walk, and even with something relatively minor, maybe my knee starts to hurt a little bit, and I can see in my mind my first reaction is, "Oh," you know, it's like, "Oh." And then: I am not exempt. What has the nature for the body to decay and

grow old and ill and die?

What's so striking is that even though intellectually we know we're not exempt, we have the feeling either that we are or that we should be. That's why the Buddha said reflect on this daily—just so we really get it into ourselves. We are not exempt. And this is just nature. It's just the law of things. It's not a mistake.

But it's very hard to really integrate that in our way of relating to the world, largely because for most of us, we're so identified with the body. A lot of the practice is really learning to see the impersonality of this physical process. It's following its own natural laws. We're not in control. We can't always, or even often, have it do what we want it to do. It's just following the law of what has the nature to grow old, grow ill, die—those things will happen.

So I would suggest reflecting on that, and on the line: I am not exempt. I have found that hugely helpful.

Was there another question? What experiences have informed your view of rebirth? Oh yes, so this is perhaps a longer topic.

In our culture, as you know, most of us don't grow up with the idea of rebirth or other planes of existence or really what the Buddhist cosmology is talking about. I had studied Western philosophy in college, and when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand, I first came in contact with Buddhism. So the idea of rebirth was really foreign to me. I had no connection with it at all. And when I look back over these many years, it's been interesting for me to trace my evolution in how I relate to that notion.

The first important piece was through beginning study of the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha talks about rebirth a lot. It's not some little piece that he just added to the teachings. It really informs the meaning of the first noble truth, because the Buddha's talking not only about the difficulties we may face in this lifetime in understanding dukkha, but his view of dukkha and what motivated his own quest for awakening and enlightenment. If you think of this endless cycle of rebirth, then the Four Noble Truths take on a whole different level of meaning and importance. So he spoke about it a lot when you read the suttas, the discourses.

But I began to see a shift in my own relationship to rebirth through my practice in the early years, when so much of what the Buddha said that I was able to verify through my experience turned out to be true. If he said this happens in practice, yes, that's right. And then the next thing, and the next, and the next. So I began to think, well, if he was right about so much, maybe he's right about rebirth too. This was just the beginning of a willingness to be open to the possibility. It still wasn't anything like a strong belief.

This openness to possibility was expressed very well by a line, I think by the poet Coleridge: "the willing suspension of disbelief." Because we can be attached to disbelief as well as being attached to beliefs. The willing suspension of disbelief means that here is some idea which we may not be familiar with, which is not part of our upbringing or conditioning, but here it is in the Buddha's teachings. So we simply suspend our disbelief, which leaves us in a very open space. We don't know, but we're willing to consider. That was

kind of a turning point.

Then I met teachers, and one in particular: Dipa Ma. Has anyone spoken about her? She was this extraordinary, just extraordinary woman with amazing realization and metta. She would talk about rebirth from her own experience, because through the development of deep samadhi, deep concentration, there is a methodology for seeing past lives. So she would speak to us about this from her own experience. Of course, that also is not proof, but I had no reason to disbelieve her. She was just such an extraordinary being, an extraordinary yogi. So she was the first one who was talking about rebirth from her own direct experience of it.

Then I met a young Sri Lankan boy—I don't know whether anyone has spoken about Dhammaruwan? There was this young boy from Sri Lanka. At age two or three, he started spontaneously chanting these long Pali texts, whole suttas, like the Satipatthana Sutta, many suttas, as a two-year-old. He had no experience in this life of any of it. And there are recordings of this. After the retreat, you could go online and listen. It's amazing because here's this young boy in the voice of a two-year-old chanting the suttas impeccably, perfectly. And also in a melody that is not even current in Sri Lanka now—an ancient way of chanting. As he grew older, his samadhi, his concentration, was very strong, and he remembered being a chanting monk from hundreds of years ago. He was remembering his past life and saying this is where all of that was coming from. So that was interesting.

Perhaps the last thing I'll say—though I could go on and on with different examples—is what really connected me more deeply with the possibility of rebirth. As my own practice deepened, it's not that I had any memories of past lives, but I began to have a much deeper sense of the nature of awareness, the nature of consciousness as being an immaterial phenomenon. And when I realized that consciousness itself is immaterial, it just made sense to me. I could connect in some way intuitively with the idea that consciousness was not inextricably tied to this physical body, because it's not a physical phenomenon. It didn't seem so unlikely anymore.

People could have many questions about this, and obviously in this life, the brain is part of the process of consciousness arising. But that still doesn't make consciousness itself a material phenomenon. So all of this together led me to an inclination to believe. I realize that none of the things I've said prove it. But when I put them all together, I'm inclined to believe—and we'll see. Which in one way makes the dying process very interesting. What's next, if anything? We'll all find out.

Question: Now that you mentioned the nature of mind—seeing the empty nature of mind is a high bar. What are some ways to begin to understand this in theory, and how to approach it in practice? Also, in order to cut through our clinging to awareness as the last vestige of "I," how shall we work with and understand the moment of not finding mind when instructed to look for it?

From the first part of the question, in terms of understanding or experiencing the empty nature of mind, of consciousness—first it's helpful to understand what emptiness means in this regard. People can hear

the word "emptiness" and have all kinds of thoughts about what it means. Just generally in English, if we say something is empty, it doesn't even seem that desirable. But in Buddhism, it means something quite specific. Especially in the context of Vipassana practice, emptiness means emptiness of self, or empty of intrinsic existence. It's helpful just to understand that this is what the term refers to.

Different traditions have different methodologies for experiencing it. Within the classical framework of Theravada Buddhism, and especially in the tradition that we practice in, the basic understanding is that our experience unfolds in a pairwise progression of knowing an object. In every moment there's knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, a thought, an image, an emotion. Every moment there's this pairwise progression—the knowing and what's being known.

As the practice deepens, our perception of the impermanence of this progression becomes very refined. It's what I've called over the years "NPMs"—noticings per minute. In the beginning of our practice, the NPMs are a bit low. As our practice deepens, the NPMs get really high. For example, even in the feeling of a breath—if you can remember when you first began your meditation, it was "in-breath, out-breath," as if an in-breath is one thing, or an out-breath is one thing. But as I'm sure you've experienced now with more practice, within the in-breath, how many separate moments of subtle sensations are occurring? In every in-breath, every out-breath.

According to Buddhist psychology, these mind moments—separate individual mind moments knowing an object—it's said there are seventeen trillion per second. I don't know who counted them. But let's at least take it metaphorically: a lot. It's happening very, very rapidly, this arising and passing. And that's why it can be hard to see the impermanent nature of consciousness or awareness. It's like when you have a torch and you whirl it around—it looks like a circle of fire. But actually it's not a circle; it's continual movement. The same thing is happening in this whole flow of our mind-body experience. It feels more or less solid or stable, but it's actually this very rapid flow of things arising and passing.

So there are stages in Vipassana where we have attuned to this pairwise progression, and we really are experiencing it—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. At a certain point, the mind becomes very much attuned just to the disappearance, to the disappearing side. Sometimes it focuses on what's arising, the arising side,

But at another stage, the mind attunes to the disappearing side. Everything's vanishing, vanishing, vanishing, vanishing. When we have that experience, it becomes so clear that consciousness is not self, because each moment it's just disappearing. There's no stability. It doesn't last long enough to be considered self. This gives us a very immediate and strong experience of the selfless nature of consciousness, the empty nature of consciousness.

So this is one approach to understanding what emptiness of consciousness or awareness means. But there's another approach, which was indicated in one of the questions. Some techniques suggest looking for the mind and then realizing that it can't be found.

One way of doing this—and sometimes I'll do this in my own practice now because I found it to be very immediately effective—sometimes when I'm sitting and there are different sounds happening... Now, when we're hearing sounds, first of all, it's effortless. We don't have to make an effort to hear. When the sound arises, the awareness of hearing is right there. So when sounds are arising, sometimes I'll just prompt my mind with the question: Can I find what's knowing the sound? Right in the moments of experiencing the sound. I'm hearing things. Oh, can I find what's knowing it? And then I'm actually turning the attention back onto the knowing aspect, turning the attention back onto the knowing. Can I find it? There's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening, because I'm still hearing it. So right there we get a very immediate sense of the empty, selfless nature of awareness—because there's nothing to find.

Does this make sense? You could play with this. It's interesting because this particular method I didn't really come across in the Theravada teachings, but I find it in Zen teachings, in Tibetan teachings—this very methodology of looking for the mind and then not finding. As one of the great Tibetan masters said, "The not finding is the finding." That's what's to be understood: that it can't be found. And it has a very immediate release from distress.

Sometimes I'll be walking, just living my life, but there's something disturbing my mind about something. Because I know that little dialogue with Bodhidharma so well, all I have to do is—I'm going along, caught up in some train of thought that's distressing in some way or other—and all I have to do is say, "Oh, already pacified." I don't have to go through the whole sequence, because I know: it can't be found, already pacified. It's an immediate channel to peace of mind. So I recommend it.

Would you please talk about stream entry? How does one know stream entry has been realized? What are the signs? How does the practice change? And can you please describe what an awakened mind resting in natural awareness looks and feels like?

Okay. I picked the hard ones.

I think the simplest description the Buddha gave of the awakened mind—and in fact, this was one way he described Nibbana—he said: the mind free of greed and hatred and delusion. I like that because it's very pragmatic. It's not abstract and it's not some metaphysical whatever. It's pointing very directly to the qualities in our mind and to the potential of freeing the mind from those defilements, of having greed and hatred and delusion uprooted so they don't arise again.

One time we asked Dipa Ma what was in her mind, and she said, "Love, concentration, and peace." That seems like a pretty good description of the awakened mind.

Reflecting back on the description of this pairwise progression—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object—this is just the whole play of samsara. This is our life. This is actually what's happening: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

So the moment of stream entry... as our practice goes through the various stages of insight, when all the factors—basically the factors of enlightenment—come into balance and are matured, and we have come to a place of great equanimity, at a certain point that flow of knowing an object can stop, opening to the reality which is called nibbana, or the unborn, or the unformed, or the unmanifest. It is its own reality, which we can experience in that moment of the process of knowing an object coming to an end. At first that can be just for a moment, a split-second moment. But because there is an opening to a reality completely apart from this conditioned flow of phenomena, it transforms our whole understanding.

It's as if we're experiencing this whole process referring to a self-center, and that's how we're living our lives. Then in that moment, it's opening to the zero-center. In that moment, we really have uprooted the view that there is some self-center to the process. The whole view of self has been uprooted because there's been the experience of going beyond the conditioned process—the opening to the zero center.

There are some subtleties with this, and often some confusion. Sometimes it's described as though in that moment there is no knowing at all. But actually, there is a subtle knowing, and this is called—we're really getting into the weeds here—supermundane consciousness. The knowing of nibbana, the knowing of the zero center, is supermundane consciousness, because it's not the usual consciousness of knowing an object. It's a special kind of knowing that takes nibbana as the object.

The reason this is important is that it allows there to be the experience of that zero center. If there was no supermundane consciousness to know it, we would have no idea of what it was, because there was no knowing of it. But this knowing is very subtle—very subtle and supermundane. That's why the great masters who have mastered the ability to drop into that space can speak very directly from experience of the nature of that nibbanic state.

Are we together on this? This is really getting into some subtle aspects.

So how does one know? Even from that first moment of stream entry, which is the first stage of awakening where the view of self has been uprooted, sometimes it's really clear. Sometimes it's like a lightning bolt—such a strong break in the flow of conditioned phenomena. It can be such a powerful moment, and the understanding that the view of self has been uprooted is sometimes incredibly clear, so there's just no doubt.

But it's also possible for this experience to happen in a less powerful way, and people may have a certain experience of these moments of stopping and not really be clear about what it is. Even the teachers may not be clear, because the Buddha taught there are five different causes for a cessation experience, and only one of them is the experience of nibbana. People can experience a cessation because of too much concentration, or too much calm, or too much rapture, or too much sloth. With that imbalance, people can sometimes have these moments of cessation and maybe think, "Well, this is it." And it might be, but it might not be. They may not know, and sometimes it's hard even for the teacher to know.

Generally, when we're tracking somebody's meditation, we assess the path by putting the experience in the context of where their practice is at, so sometimes that's an indication. But the real indication, and I think this is really important—because these states are so subtle and can easily be misinterpreted or misunderstood—the real measure is whether the defilements appropriate to each particular stage of awakening have been uprooted or not.

That we can see over time. If we've had different experiences, we can really watch our own minds and see whether that view of self has really been uprooted or not, whether doubt about it has been uprooted or not. I think that's the most important indication.

Another aspect of it is that there's a much greater integration of ethical behavior from that moment. There are just certain actions that can't be done after that experience.

These would be the measures.

Do you have any questions about anything I just said? Because this is really getting down into some of the depths of practice. I just want to make sure that it was reasonably clear.

Can you expand on how this realization changes your practice?

So the question was how this realization changes one's practice. One of the most significant ways is that one of the defilements that is uprooted at that first stage is doubt. It's kind of like when you put your hand in fire—do you have any doubt that it burns? No, you know from experience. And there's nothing anybody could say that would shake that knowledge.

It's the same thing. When one has had that experience, doubt about it and about the Buddha's teaching and the path, that doubt is uprooted because one has had the experience for themselves. And that's a huge benefit, because I'm sure at different times, before that level, all kinds of doubts can arise in the mind about the path, about the practice, about our own ability. Having that uprooted really matters, and that's one of the reasons it is said that from that point on, full enlightenment is inevitable. It still may take numbers of lifetimes, but one is inevitably on the path.

But I also want to give you some good news. Stream entry in Pali is called *sotāpanna*. There is also a stage called *cūḷa sotāpanna*, which means "little sotāpanna." Little sotāpanna is actually a stage of vipassanā practice which comes much before that. It's that stage when we've developed enough concentration and mindfulness so we're not struggling with the hindrances all the time, we're kind of in the flow, and we're in that stage of seeing the rapid rising and passing away of phenomena.

So this is not some far-off attainment. This is well within the capacity of yogis practicing, and many have experienced this stage of arising and passing away. Even from that stage, little sotāpanna, it is said the path is set. You're on the path.

I think that's good news, because that is really quite accessible to many practitioners. And it is a very

significant stage of insight—we're just seeing the rapid rise and passing of everything.

It seems that many great teachers went through grueling periods of practice. Your example with Sayadaw U Pandita, for instance. Is this necessary or helpful to advance on the path? Sitting through pain is not in the seven factors of awakening, but joy and calm are. Can you comment on the context of wise effort?

So I want to share my view of the Buddha mind—not that I'm being presumptuous or anything.

We all have a certain comfort zone in our experience, whether it's physical, emotional, or psychological. We have a certain realm of experience that we feel comfortable in. In life, but also very much so in our practice, we come to the edge of our comfort zone. Maybe it's dealing with physical pain. Maybe it's dealing with difficult emotions. We get to that edge where we're not so steady, not so stable.

But that's actually the place we want to be in our practice. Because if we can relax into whatever that experience is, then our comfort zone gets a little bigger. And then we get to another edge, and we practice with that, and it gets a little bigger.

So my projection of the Buddha mind, or the enlightened mind, is a mind without edges. And a mind without edges is a mind without fear. It's just total openness with whatever is arising.

As a general principle, that's why it's helpful to play the edges, not to just retreat into one's comfort zone. And there's another reason why this is so helpful in terms of applying a spiritual practice to our life.

I'd be sitting there, and in that situation, yes, I could change my position and the pain would go away. But there are many situations in life that people go through where we can't simply walk away from it. Where there's some disease or illness or accident, something happening to the body where the pain is there. Maybe it will be part of the dying process—we don't know. But in those situations, there's not an option just to change posture. How are we going to be with that? When we're in a situation that is not in our control, that we cannot change immediately or move away from, have we developed the strength, the resilience, the openness to at least approach the possibility of: Can I be with this? Can I open to this?

And sometimes it gets really challenging. For me, before I started sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, I had been practicing a long time, and things were going along really, really well. My body was at ease and my mind was just flowing along. But one of the things I realized in retrospect was that it wasn't really going anyplace. I was in this very pleasant meditative mode, but I was coasting—because Sayadaw so emphasized right effort. And I'll just say, some teachers emphasize that; I've had other teachers who did not emphasize it so much. But for me at that time, because I had been coasting along in my practice and kind of enjoying it, his instruction was like a metaphorical kick in the pants. Okay, Joseph, get to work.

Even though it was challenging, I appreciated that encouragement. At that point in my practice, I started using a mantra for myself: choose the difficult. If there was a choice, choose the difficult—which went totally against my nature, because my nature was to choose the easy. It hardly made sense to choose the

difficult. But in working with Sayadaw, it was very much about choosing the difficult. And my practice became tremendously energized by that kind of right effort.

It's also important to say that this kind of effort can get out of balance. So there's an art to upping the energy level, the right effort level, but doing it in a completely balanced way. And that's an art. We have to experiment and watch ourselves. Are we getting too tight? Okay, we need to relax a bit. Too relaxed? We need to tighten a bit. And that's an ongoing process. It's not that we find right effort and then we have it for the rest of our meditative career. It's like tuning the strings of an instrument—it continually needs to be tuned. And that's what we have to do in our own practice with right effort.

Here's something related that came up as questions: If you feel like your practice has stalled, do you have any tips for re-energizing the practice without jumping to over-efforting or using will? And what would you say are the three aspects of retreat practice you've seen yogis take for granted or not lean into—where they've held back or shrunk back?

I think it's really helpful to understand that in this long meditative journey—and it's not about six weeks and it's not about three months; this is over years and years of practice—there's a real commitment. Not always intensive practice, obviously, but periods of intensive practice. Our life is really informed by our commitment to the path. And there will inevitably be times when we're in the doldrums, where we're practicing and nothing much seems to be happening. I've had that experience at different times, different stages. I remember very clearly one time when I was still practicing in India, and it just felt like I was not going anyplace.

I was kind of dragging myself through the practice and wasn't seeing much result or particular benefit at that time. After struggling with this for some while, I finally resolved it for myself. I gave myself a little talking to. I said, "Joseph, just sit and walk. Sit and walk. That's your job. Let the Dharma take care of the rest."

So that's what I started doing. I thought, okay, if it's the doldrums, fine. My job is simply to sit and walk, sit and walk, sit and walk. And when I stopped fighting with the experience of being in the doldrums and could simply accept, okay, this is what's happening, I'm going to just keep doing my part—I can't remember now, this was a long time ago, how long it took, but it didn't take that long until the wind came back. I don't know what the sailing term is, when the wind carries you out of the doldrums—but the Dharma wind returned and the practice kept unfolding.

I think that is really the main message. And it's related to the pāramī of patience, where things are not unfolding according to our wants or desires or expectations. They're following their own laws. The Dharma path is unfolding in its own time. And if we understand the practice and the path, and we just keep taking the next step, it will inevitably lead to purification of mind, inevitably lead to awakening, because we're going in the right direction.

But the path isn't a straight line going upward. It's a sine curve—rising and falling—but the slope of the curve is going up. Generally we're not patient enough to see that. We're just judging: we're up here and we feel great, we're down here and we feel terrible. This is normal. This is how it goes. But the slope of the curve is going up, and that's why perseverance and patience matter. We just keep going, and the whole Dharma unfolds.

I would really like to encourage you to remember this, because I know it so deeply from my own practice. And working for fifty years with yogis, I've seen the same thing over and over again. There are specific things one could do, but I wanted to mention this general attitude, which I think is foundational.

One of the aspects of the doldrums is that the mind gets bored. It feels like nothing much is happening, and we just get bored and lose energy. Back in the sixties or seventies, there was a very famous psychologist named Fritz Perls. He was the founder of Gestalt psychology, which in those years was a big thing. I came across an understanding of boredom—something he said which totally resonated with me and the practice. He said, "Boredom is lack of attention." Boredom doesn't have to do with what's happening, with the experience. It has to do with how close our attention is to the object.

So if you're in a kind of doldrum and the mind is getting bored, see what happens if you can remember this. Because in that state—which I call "more or less mindful"—we're going along and we're kind of there. Kind of. But we're not really closely connected to the object, closely feeling it. What I've found is that when my mind is feeling bored or not so connected, I simply bring the mind in close, feeling, for example, the sensations of a step really closely. And it's amazing. In that moment of close attention, the boredom is gone, the disconnect is gone, the energy is there.

So there are ways of adjusting while we're exploring and investigating. When we're feeling that "nothing much happening" stage, we can really look at how our mind is relating to the moment's object, and almost always, it's because our attention is not close. We're not feeling it closely.

And you know this. I'm sure you've all had this experience. For somebody on the outside who hasn't done practice, if they saw you doing walking meditation back and forth, they must think, "That is the most boring thing in the world."

What could be more boring? But I'm sure you've had the experience, at least at times when you're here, where you are so embodied and feeling the sensations of the body and the movement. The mind can be totally engaged for a long period of time. We could be walking for half an hour or an hour, completely engaged in it. From the outside, the activity would be incredibly boring. But boredom has to do with lack of attention. And so it's just to remember this, because sometimes the attention does get a little distant from the object. But you can adjust that.

Here's another question that's related: "I often lack a friendly attitude in mindfulness practice. There is anxiety and a lot of striving. The mind has been feeling more like an ice cube than water for quite a while.

Any suggestions?"

I have suggestions about everything. Whether they're good or not, that's another matter.

Are you familiar with the paintings of Jackson Pollock? For those of you who are not, he's an abstract artist. Big, big paintings with swirls and splatters of color throughout the whole canvas. From one perspective, one might call it a busy mess, because there's so much going on. But you put a frame around the whole picture and you step back and you take in the whole of it, and you see it as a great work of art. If you were looking at just the swirls, it would be the equivalent of an agitated mind. But you put a frame around it and the whole relationship to it changes.

It's often hard to remember that when we're having a lot of agitation or confusion or whatever those various mind states are. Sometimes by trying to dive into it and sort it out, it can get overwhelming. But sometimes when there's some big, powerful energy going on, whether in the body or the mind, we don't need to do that. We can put a big frame around the whole. Even if one would kind of step back and just make the note "confusion" — it's not necessarily trying to figure out, "Oh, why am I confused and how can I change it?" It's just stepping back: "Oh, confused mind." And in that moment, you are in a proper relationship to that whole mind state, and you're not caught up in the suffering of it because you're being mindful of it.

One kind of image or metaphor that you might call to mind in terms of your practice: sometimes a zoom lens is appropriate, where you're really zooming in and seeing in a very precise and refined way, moment after moment, what's happening. But sometimes a wide-angle lens is appropriate. If there's some big thing going on in the mind or in the body and you just can't dive into it because it's too agitating, put a wide-angle lens on the camera of your mind and just take in the whole thing. Then it's possible to be with anything. And I think it will bring the mind back to a place of ease and of balance.

Because there's nothing, there's no experience we can have that is outside of the capacity to be mindful of it. Whatever it is — sometimes it's really pleasant, sometimes it's really unpleasant, sometimes it's confusing, sometimes it's peaceful — it doesn't matter. Whatever it is, we can be mindful of it. We just have to frame it properly.

We're at an end. I'm trying to think of some profound last words. Well, you can always count on the Buddha to have some profound last words.

In terms of what the whole methodology of the practice is about, I think it's important to realize this, because sometimes we get caught up in an overemphasis on technique or method as if that's the essence of the practice. But the essence of the practice is using the various techniques and methods and methodologies for one end. And the Buddha expressed this really clearly. He said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine."

Whoever understands this, understands the whole of the Dharma.

It's helpful, even as we engage in the method of practicing mindfulness, to reflect on the purpose of it all. The insight and wisdom we're cultivating is an opening to the full range of our experience without clinging to any of it as being I or mine. Not the body, not the mind, not thoughts, not emotions—nothing.

This leaves us open to the whole range of experience, but from a place of freedom.

And that's really what this practice is about.

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