Dukkha and Non-Self (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:03:20

After the Buddha's enlightenment, he spent about seven weeks underneath the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya contemplating the profound realizations of his awakening. Then he wondered who might be receptive to these teachings, and he thought of the five ascetics with whom he had practiced for the previous six years, who were then living in Sarnath, a small village across the river from Benares.

After having spent seven weeks in and around the Bodhi tree, the Buddha set off on foot, and it's said it took him about six weeks to reach Sarnath. He gave his first teaching on the full moon of June. The name of that first discourse is called Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion—the first discourse expressing his awakened realization.

I find it inspiring to think of just the setting of this wheel of the Dharma in motion and realizing that this wheel has rolled across continents, across oceans, and somehow ended up in Woodacre. Here we are, really, as the result of that first discourse. It's pretty amazing.

He gave that talk and one of the five ascetics became a stream enterer, which is the first stage of awakening. Then the Buddha taught the whole group for a few more days and all the rest became stream enterers as well—which is the advantage of having the Buddha as your guide.

Then he gave his second discourse, which is called the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the discourse on the characteristic of non-self. Upon hearing this discourse, all five of these ascetics became fully enlightened, became arahants. So we're going to try and replicate that this evening. Listen carefully.

The teaching of non-self or no-self is really at the heart of the Buddha's realization. But unlike the truths of impermanence or the truths of suffering, of dukkha, which are easily understood even if we have not fully actualized these understandings in our lives—it's not hard to understand that things change and that things are ultimately unsatisfying—understanding the truth of non-self is really not obvious at all. It's almost counterintuitive. It runs counter to our everyday common sense understanding of who we are and how we live in the world.

Language, most languages, keeps reinforcing this with the "I" as the subject of most verbs. Language itself keeps reinforcing this sense that there's an "I" or a self as the subject of all experience, as the reference point for all experience. And yet it was precisely the teachings on non-self that led the five ascetics to full awakening, to full liberation.

Tonight I'd like to explore some elements of this discourse and to see how we can come to a deeper understanding, a more deeply felt understanding, of what non-self actually means and how we experience

it, both in our practice and in our lives. As you listen to some of the words of the Buddha which I'll be reading—just some short excerpts from the discourse—please, if you can, listen as if you're hearing the words directly from the Buddha. You're not listening to it as a kind of philosophic description of reality. That's not what the Buddha was about. His teachings are all instructions. They're things for us to do in order to realize the truths he's talking about. See if you can let the teachings in in that way.

In reading from this discourse, there's one word which I will leave untranslated, and that's the word dukkha, which we've spoken about quite a bit this week. The Four Noble Truths all revolve around this one word: the truth of dukkha, the cause of dukkha, the end of dukkha, and the path leading to the end of dukkha. It's really important we have a clear understanding of what this word means. The problem is that there's no one English word which captures the fullness of its meaning, and so it often leads to some confusion.

Dukkha is often translated as suffering—the truth of suffering. At times this translation is completely appropriate. We're all quite familiar with the pain and discomfort and suffering that can arise in this body and mind. Dukkha as suffering is something we can relate to and understand quite easily.

But then how do we reconcile the Buddha's very far-reaching declaration that all conditioned things—which means everything we experience—how do we reconcile dukkha as suffering with the statement that all conditioned things are dukkha? Because there are many experiences in our lives which are pleasurable and which we enjoy and which are agreeable and delightful. How does dukkha relate to those kinds of experiences?

Here words other than suffering will give a more complete sense of what dukkha means. We might translate dukkha in these contexts as unreliable, or ultimately unsatisfying, or insecure. We can experience the various pleasures of life, and we do, and at the same time have the understanding that these pleasures, which bring us a kind of happiness, are still dukkha in the sense that they are unreliable precisely because they're impermanent. We can understand them as being ultimately unsatisfying. Even though they satisfy us in the moment, we understand they're not going to last. That's the dukkha of even pleasurable experiences.

In listening to the discourse, you want to have this more expanded understanding of what dukkha means, so that you realize it does include every aspect of experience. All conditioned things are dukkha—even the pleasant, even the agreeable, even the things we enjoy—in the sense that they are ultimately unreliable.

This understanding of dukkha, I think, is not that hard to grasp. We all have experience of it. Yet it's precisely this understanding of dukkha that is intimately related to the realization of non-self. And that's what I want to begin the evening with—the relationship between understanding the unreliability, the dukkha, of all conditioned things, and how that helps us understand the teaching on non-self or no-self. Because it's precisely this relationship between dukkha and non-self, when we see it clearly, that opens the doorway to greater freedom.

So this is from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, just a small part of it. As most of you know, the discourses open classically with the phrase "Thus have I heard," because it's the Buddha's disciple Ānanda who was reciting the suttas after the Buddha's death from memory. "Thus have I heard," and then he repeats what he had heard from the Buddha.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was living near Benares, in the deer park at Sarnath, and there he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five—that is, these five ascetics.

Now this is just a little footnote. If you remember from the first night, I spoke of how bhikkhus is often translated as monastics—bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, monks and nuns. But in its more general meaning, it refers to everyone on the path. Right here in this first discourse, these five ascetics were not yet monks in the Buddha's order. He hadn't even really begun teaching yet, and yet he addressed them as bhikkhus. So when you hear bhikkhus, it's you.

"Bhikkhus." "Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this: "Bhikkhus, form—which means the body, the material elements, the physical elements—is non-self." In the sutta, they're using the word "form" as the translation of the Pali word rūpa, but I think it becomes more immediate if we focus on the particular meaning of the body, because then it's easier to relate these teachings to our own experience.

"Bhikkhus, the body is non-self. Were the body self, then this body would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine: let my body be like this, let my body not be like this. But because the body is non-self, it leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine: let my body be like this, let my body not be like this."

It's pretty simple, but with some profound implications. The Buddha is highlighting two aspects of dukkha here, and both of these aspects are going to relate to the realization of non-self.

The first aspect of dukkha the Buddha is highlighting is that the body, the physical elements, the material elements, lead to affliction. That's a pretty direct statement. The second aspect of dukkha is that the elements, this body, these physical elements, are ungovernable. They are not subject to our will. We can't say, "Oh, let my body be like this, let my body be like that." It doesn't work like that. The body is following its own natural laws.

We need to really look and investigate how these two aspects are at play in our lives. Because if you listen to this and it's just, "Oh yeah, this is the Buddhist take on things," it doesn't really have much transformative value. The transformation happens when we apply the words directly to our own experience and check it out. Is this true? Is it not true? How does it apply?

So the question could well arise: How does the body, how do the physical elements, lead to affliction? Is that true? It's actually not hard to see, even when we would rather not acknowledge it. We can understand the afflictive nature of the body, the afflictive nature of the physical elements, in some of the most ordinary of our daily activities. I think it was Ruth, or someone else who mentioned one of the other

nights, the affliction of hunger and thirst. These are just common experiences in the body.

But we often don't reflect on these very ordinary experiences of being hungry or thirsty as an affliction of the body, because for most of us, these are easily remedied. We feel a little thirsty, we drink some water. We feel hungry, we take some food. For most of us, this is pretty available. And so we don't stop to pay attention to what's actually motivating us to take food or drink. What's motivating us is the feeling of suffering.

But because we can so easily address it, we don't generally stop to think of the body in those terms—that this is an affliction of the body requiring our attention.

For many millions, perhaps billions of people in the world, these remedies are not so easily available. I read that over a billion people don't have access to safe drinking water. A billion people. And perhaps that same number or more don't have access to adequate, healthy food. One article noted that in many developing countries, women have to walk over three miles to get water, carrying twenty-five pounds back to their village—just as a daily undertaking. For people for whom these basic necessities are not readily available, the hunger and thirst of the body is clearly seen as an affliction.

We can see the afflictive nature of the physical, material elements in natural disasters as well. We're all becoming increasingly aware of the great destructive power of the elements—the fires, the floods, the earthquakes. These are just physical elements, material elements doing their thing. It's simply nature. And yet we see the tremendous destructive power that can manifest. The looming, potentially disastrous consequences of climate change—it's just the physical elements at work. But there's a great afflictive power in the very nature of these elements.

There's also a very immediate way of touching this afflictive nature of the body. And probably, as you hear these words, you have some sense of just not wanting to hear them. All this talk of the afflictive nature of the body—is this what I came here for? But we have to overcome that resistance and really check in to see what's actually going on.

One very accessible place to see and experience this is in the simple necessity to change postures to relieve discomfort. Why do we ever move? You come in and sit down. Why not sit until you get enlightened? That's what the Bodhisattva reportedly did under the tree—he made this resolve: "I'm going to sit here until full awakening." Fortunately, it happened that night.

But what would it be like to come into the hall and think, "Okay, I'm in my seat. I'm not moving"? After some time, the body becomes very uncomfortable. It becomes painful. And we have to shift position to alleviate that pain. So then you stand up. Well, that seems more sustainable. Stand for a few hours—four hours, however long. At a certain point, standing too becomes painful, and you'll have to lie down.

I once made this experiment while practicing in India. I was so fed up with this affliction of body posture that I got a thick piece of foam and just lay flat on my back, completely supported, nothing crossed,

nothing bent. I thought, "Great, I can just be here forever." It didn't take long until even in that position the body became uncomfortable. You have to roll over, move, stretch—whatever.

So there's a little tagline describing all this: movement masks dukkha. Movement obscures the suffering that the body is actually experiencing. Try this as an experiment. Just as you go through the day, if you remember, pay attention to why you move. Whenever you make a movement, what's motivating it? I think you'll find that for at least a good part of the time, we're moving to alleviate some discomfort.

This shows us so immediately what the Buddha is talking about in terms of the afflictive nature of the elements. It's not that it's bad. It's just how they are. This is the nature of the elements. What's interesting is that because we're not often paying attention to why we move, and because we move habitually, this masks dukkha. It gives us the illusion of thinking that we have some control over the elements.

You know, that this is me, this body is me, and I can control whether it's comfortable or uncomfortable—because we haven't really been paying attention to what it is that's causing us to move, to act. Movement masks dukkha. It's helpful to really look at that because it gives us a very immediate sense of the nature of these elements of the body.

But at some time or other, the second aspect of dukkha—not only the afflictive nature, but their ungovernable nature—becomes very obvious. The elements are ungovernable. So what does this mean?

Most likely, we'd all like to stay young and healthy, with a vigorous, active body that responds to what we'd like to do and fulfills our aspirations. But the body is not really obliging us in this way. Quite without our consent, it gets older. It gets sick. Different diseases or accidents occur. And then finally it dies. The elements of the body are ungovernable. It's like we don't have control over these things. It's not that it's chaotic—everything is happening lawfully. It's just that we haven't made the laws. They're following their own laws.

This is not hard to see, but are we paying attention to it? Are we really reflecting that this is the nature of the body and we don't have control over it? A big relief, if we can absorb this understanding, is recognizing that this process—this ungovernable process of the body and the physical elements—applies to all the mental aggregates as well. We're focusing on the body because it's a very tangible example, but you can think of the same afflictive, ungovernable nature applying to all of the mental activity too.

It's helpful to just remember that it's not a mistake. It's not that we're doing anything wrong. This is just how things are. This is the Dharma. This is the nature of these physical elements.

And so these are the words of the Buddha: "For this reason, the body is not self. If the body were self, we should be able to determine, 'Let it be like this, let it not be like that.' Bhikkhus, every form of the body, whether past, future, or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, must with right understanding be regarded thus. Any form of the body should be regarded thus: this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

We want to take that in. Why is it not I, not mine, not myself? Because the elements of the body lead to affliction and they're not governable. If we really were the owner of the body, we would command it to be always agreeable and pleasant. It's for this reason that the Buddha said this body—past, present, future—is not I, not mine, not myself.

So maybe we begin to get some glimmer of understanding of this. Then the question is: What's the response? What do we do with this? Even once we understand the non-self, dukkha nature, how do we relate? What's the proper response?

Again, the Buddha gave some very specific instructions: "Bhikkhus"—that's you—"whatever is not yours, the body, all the mental activity, whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

Right here we have to be a little careful, because the word "abandon" in English has all kinds of connotations. Abandoning in this context doesn't mean to ignore the body or the physical environment. It doesn't mean not taking care of the body or the physical environment. Rather, when the Buddha is saying abandon, he's really saying abandon the identification with it. Abandon the attachment to it. Abandon the hope that it will stay a certain way and a way that's to our liking. All of that is to be abandoned—the attachment, the clinging, the identification. When you have abandoned in this way, this will lead to your welfare and happiness.

So one of the problems with all this—and hopefully this is reasonably clear—

These are not esoteric truths. They're often overlooked truths, things that we're just not paying attention to, but they're not difficult to really see and check out in our own experience. The challenge for us is how do we fully realize this and actualize this in our lives, given how strongly conditioned the identification with the body is.

This is not an insignificant identification. Somebody comes up and says, "Who are you?" and this is who I am. It's so deeply conditioned, the sense of the body being self. So it takes some work. It takes some determined investigation, determined exploration to begin to break the power of this conditioning.

There's one collection of discourses in which the Buddha taught a series of reflections that can have a very powerful effect in cutting through—in helping to cut through—our attachment to the body, our identification with the body, our taking of the body to be self.

"Bhikkhus, there are these five themes which should often be reflected upon. What five? I am subject to old age. I am not exempt from old age. I am subject to illness. I am not exempt from illness. I am subject to death. I am not exempt from death. I must be parted from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me. I am the owner of my karma, the heir of my karma. I have karma as my origin, karma as my relative, karma as my resort. I will be the heir of whatever karma, good or bad, that I do."

Especially in the first few reflections, there's one phrase embedded that, for me, strikes at the core of our conditioning: I am subject to old age, to disease, to death—and I am not exempt.

I have noticed so often in myself that I can be going along feeling great and then something untoward happens and there's this surprise. I should be exempt. We think we are exempt until something happens. I don't think this is just me. So I would suggest that you look in yourself for whether we hold this unnoticed feeling that somehow we're exempt—we go through life until life teaches us otherwise. We're just going through life thinking, "Yeah, this is for other people. Other people get old. Other people get sick."

This reflection—I find it really powerful. Often in life situations where something disagreeable happens, I'll use that phrase in my mind. It will come: "Oh, and I am not exempt." And it really makes things more easeful, because this is just the nature of things. This is how things are.

Frequently practicing these reflections can really become part of your daily practice. It's a very good thing to do because even though it's stating the obvious, it's not something we often keep in mind. The reflections are a way of keeping these understandings on the front burner of our lives, so that as we're going through all of the activities and the busyness and the engagement and all the craziness of our lives, there's that quiet place in which we realize: yes, I am subject to old age and I'm not exempt. Subject to illness, not exempt. Subject to dying, not exempt. It really keeps the flame of understanding alive in us.

Years ago I was teaching at Vallecitos in New Mexico, a wilderness retreat center for social and environmental activists. On the last day of the retreat, we were going for a hike and I had a little accident—I hyperextended my knee walking on some slippery rocks. I came back and was giving the talk that night, and in those years I was still sitting cross-legged. I had the thought, "Hmm, better not sit cross-legged." But I ignored the thought, sat cross-legged, and couldn't get up. After the hour-long talk, I had to be carried to my room, which was a little embarrassing, being carried out of the hall.

All night I was up with a kind of self-blame. Why wasn't I more careful? I had a really busy summer schedule of traveling. How am I going to manage this? I couldn't put any weight on my knee. And then, at a certain point in the midst of this mental turmoil, a little mantra arose in my mind—one I've found so helpful over all these years.

What came to my mind was just this very simple statement: anything can happen anytime. Just anything can happen anytime. This is simply the nature of impermanence and uncertainty and ungovernableness.

What was interesting for me about that phrase was that instead of engendering a certain kind of paranoia and fear—"Oh my God, anything can happen anytime!"—it was exactly the opposite. By accepting the truth of it, I could let down the defenses against it. So instead of living defensively, worried that anything could happen anytime, we simply recognize that this is how things are. We can drop back into a place of ease, of openness, of acceptance. It made it so much easier. It really cut through all the self-judgment that had been arising in my mind.

In a similar recollection, the Buddha offered some other reflections which highlight the universality of these experiences. We tend, even when we do acknowledge them or are living through them, to collapse into personalizing them—sometimes with self-pity or self-judgment—as if we're the only ones going through this.

So these are other reflections from the Buddha: "Because what is subject to old age grows old, when this happens the instructed noble disciple reflects thus: I am not the only one for whom what is subject to old age grows old. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to illness grows ill. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to death dies. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to destruction is destroyed. I am not the only one for whom what is subject to loss is lost."

I find that enlarging. When we realize that these basic occurrences of life are common to all of us, when we reflect "I am not the only one, this is true of everyone," it universalizes our experience. We are all part of this great matrix of life and death, creation and destruction. That is what all life is about. It constitutes the very essence of what it means to be alive.

Through practice and reflection, we come to realize the aspect of non-self that is dukkha—its afflictive nature, its ungovernable nature, that things don't always follow our wishes and preferences. But we can also come to realize the aspect of non-self that is freeing. This is what's very interesting about anattā or selflessness. Part of it reflects the truth of dukkha: it's not self because of the affliction and the ungovernableness. But there's an aspect of non-self that is ultimately liberating. It's very helpful to see and be with this other side of anattā—namely, that not a single element of this mind or body belongs to us. Even though the elements are afflictive and ungovernable, which is the bad news, the good news is that they don't belong to us.

The Buddha gave a very direct example of this. He said: "Suppose, bhikkhus, people were to carry off the grass, the sticks, the branches and foliage in this grove of trees, or to burn them, or to do with them as they wish. Would you think, 'People are carrying us off, or burning us, or doing with us as they wish'?" "No, venerable sir, because that is neither ourself nor what belongs to ourself." If somebody were carrying off the branches and the grasses on this land, would you think they're carrying you off? No, it would not affect you in that way because they're clearly not self. "So too, bhikkhus, the body is not yours. Feelings are not yours. Perceptions are not yours. Volitional formations are not yours. Consciousness is not yours. Abandon the attachment to them. When you have abandoned what is not yours, that will lead to your welfare and happiness."

This is pretty radical. You're not going to hear this very often out there in the world. On a recent retreat, I was planning a talk for the teacher training program about emptiness of self and non-self, and in thinking about all this, the headline that arose in my mind was: "The Buddha wasn't kidding." This is so radical in terms of a different way of understanding what this mind-body is about, because all of our conditioning takes them to be self, to be who we are. The Buddha is pointing out that this is the basic delusion, the

cause of all the suffering in our lives.

So then the question comes: given all these reminders and teachings—and the suttas are filled with them; these are just a very few short examples—given all these reminders of the impermanent, ungovernable nature of the physical elements of the body and all the mental elements, why is the sense of self, the view of self, the belief in self, the concept of self so strong in us?

If it's not true, if the self really isn't there in the first place, how is it that it is created, and how is it that we've gotten so enmeshed in this view?

There are many ways of explaining this, but one of the reasons that this view of self is so deeply embedded in the way we view things is because we rely on and are satisfied with very superficial perceptions. As we go through the world perceiving it, we're just skimming the surface. Get up in the morning, look in the mirror, recognize a certain appearance, and then create a concept designating that appearance. "Yep, that's me. That's Joseph. That's self." There's a superficial perception of an appearance, and right away, automatically—"that's me." We don't look more deeply into what is really there.

There are a few ways of looking more deeply. One, which some of you may have experience of: Have you ever stayed in a hotel, or maybe you have it at home, but I've seen them in hotels—these cosmetic magnifying mirrors? Have you ever made the mistake of looking in them? We look in the regular mirror, and yeah, it looks pretty good for however old one is. But then we look in one of these mirrors—oh my God! We're seeing on another level.

Going even deeper and more fundamental than that, when we really investigate what it is that we call the body, it's a collection of different systems. There's the skeletal system of all the bones. There's the circulatory system. There's the nervous system. There's the organs. Just all of these different systems which all together relate to something we call "the body."

But if we could really see the body for what it is, we probably wouldn't say, "Oh yeah, the gallbladder is me," or "The liver is me." No. But we just wrap it all up very nicely in skin. "Oh yeah, this is me." And we get attached to this body, and we get attached to other people's bodies. I wonder how attached we would be if we had x-ray vision and really saw what was underneath it all. And it's what is really there—it's not making it up, it's not imagining it. It's just that our perception is so superficial. Our perception is on the surface of things, and we don't take the time to say, "Okay, well, what really is this body? What is this body made of?"

The corollary of this attachment to the body is the fear of losing it—the fear of death, and the grief when people that we're close to die—all because of a misperception of what this body actually is.

On an even deeper level, and this is just something I read—you can check to see if it's really true—but I read someplace that on the cellular atomic level, the body is mostly empty space. And what this one article said anyway, and again, I can't guarantee its accuracy, but it was a very interesting point: it said that if all

the matter of the body were condensed, it would be no larger than a speck of dust. That it's mostly empty space. So even if it's bigger than a speck of dust, it's still mostly empty space. So what is it that we're actually calling self? What are we claiming to be self here? Some specks of dust? Again, it takes really reflecting and looking and investigating and exploring so that we're not just skimming the surface of our perception.

So that's one way the sense of self arises, even though it's not actually there.

A strong sense of self also happens when we're lost in or identified with our thoughts and emotions. I'm sure you're very familiar with that experience now. How much of the day, even when we're practicing and trying to be aware and mindful—and often we are—but how much of the day are we caught up in and lost in the stories of our minds, the dramas of our minds? We identify with the thought: "I'm thinking, I'm feeling, I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm depressed, I'm bored, I'm excited." We're not seeing these mental activities for what they are. We're adding the "I" and "mine" to them.

And that's very habitual, and as I said earlier, our very language keeps reinforcing this—this is how we speak conventionally. I'm not suggesting we stop speaking this way, because it's conventional and it's useful. But are we going to get caught in the limitations of language, or are we going to use our practice to actually go underneath that?

We can begin to see that with thoughts arising, with different emotions arising, all of that also—just like the physical elements—arises when certain conditions are there. Conditions change, they disappear. The "I" and "mine" are extra.

There's an image found in some Tibetan teachings: thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds in the sky, having no roots, no home. I like that. Thoughts and emotions wander through the mind like clouds in the sky—no roots, no home.

Then I visualize what we usually do with our thoughts and emotions. It's like imagining a cloud with a root coming down, tethering it to the earth. It would be ridiculous. The clouds are not tethered. But that's what we're doing. So you might imagine your mind like the sky and thoughts and emotions like clouds, and then just picture each of those thoughts with a little root coming down. That is the creation of the sense of self—that tethering. But in their nature, they are not tethered. No roots, no home.

The thoughts are the thinkers. The thoughts think themselves. It's not that there is someone behind them who's having them. The nature of thought is to think. Love loves—the nature of love is to love. Fear fears. Anger angers. The "I," the "mine," are extra. We're adding that to these experiences. But we're adding it so habitually that we don't even usually notice we're doing so.

This is the essence of our practice and what mindfulness means. We want to be mindful of all these phenomena, seeing them as they are. Vipassanā means seeing clearly. So we see a thought as a thought, untethered to anything, or an emotion. There's no one behind them to whom they're happening.

What we call self—and we use that term, and it's fine to use it on a conventional level—is simply the very rapid progression of all of these elements: the physical elements, thoughts, and emotions. They create patterns, recognizable patterns, so we can recognize each other as distinct individuals. The patterns are there. The problem is we reify the pattern into being a thing.

Here's an example. You go outside on a summer day after a storm, and you see a rainbow. It's beautiful, and we see the rainbow. But what is a rainbow? Is a rainbow a thing in itself? It appears that way. But when we examine more deeply, we see that the rainbow is an appearance when certain conditions come together—light and water and moisture and air. These conditions come together, a rainbow appears. Conditions change, the rainbow disappears.

The water and the air and the light don't belong to the rainbow. The rainbow is an appearance arising from the conjunction of these elements. Self is like rainbow. With a rainbow, we see what we see—we see the rainbow, so it's not denying that level of it. But with a superficial perception, we reify the appearance into being some independent, existing thing. When we look more carefully, we see there is no rainbow apart from it being an appearance arising out of these conditions.

We relate to self on the conventional level. I'm not suggesting that we don't—just like with the rainbow, we see the rainbow. But if we're wise, we understand what it actually is. Through our practice, we can begin to understand self as being like a rainbow.

It's a pattern, a recognizable pattern of mental and physical elements working in a certain way together. But they don't belong to anyone. It's not that they belong to the self. That relationship of these elements is what we call self.

Are we together on this? Because this is so contrary to how the world understands things. And that's the brilliance and the enormous gift of the Buddhist teachings. You don't hear this very often. The Buddha had such a penetrating understanding of the cause of dukkha, of how we create this sense of self and then are imprisoned by it, and the way to be released from it.

I was conditioned very strongly by my teachers, my kalyāṇa-mittas, and my first teacher Munindraji. He was once here in California teaching at Sylvia Boorstein's house. A lot of people came and were listening to him. He began teaching at two in the afternoon and didn't stop until the last person left, which was ten at night. So I could go on for quite a while, but I won't.

In bringing this to some kind of conclusion, there was one Tibetan teacher who had a wonderful way of encapsulating the understandings of ways we do experience this as self and ways of realizing the selfless nature. This will be a bit of a paraphrase because I didn't bring the quote with me. Something like: "It's not that the self is not real. It is real. But it's not really real. You exaggerate it."

I love that. It is real on the conventional, relative level. It's real and we relate to it, and all of that is fine. But do we take the next step of realizing: yes, it's real, but it's not really real? That's the whole movement

of our practice—to get underneath the appearance of things and to really see the true nature of what this mind and body is about.

And it's not about believing any of this. All of these words and all of the Buddha's words are an invitation for us to look for ourselves. That, for me—and as some of the other teachers mentioned—is what's so inspiring about these teachings. There's nothing we have to believe. It's just to look. And then we discover this for ourselves.

The Buddha gave a very simple and direct teaching to his son Rāhula about this, and I think we can use these words that he gave to his son as our own mantra of liberation. He said that every aspect of mind and body should be seen as it is with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

It would be interesting as you go through the day, as you feel caught by various things—sights or sounds or thoughts or emotions—whenever the mind feels contracted and caught up in selfing, maybe you could remember these words. See everything with perfect wisdom: this is not I, this is not mine, this is not myself.

And then something quite extraordinary happens. Because very surprisingly, through a deepening realization of selflessness, we develop a growing sense of connection. On the deepest level, we realize there is no one there to be separate. And on that level, selflessness and love become the same thing. It all comes together in the most beautiful way.

I'll close with some words from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was really one of the greatest of the Dzogchen masters of the last century. He said: "When you realize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

We could say that compassion is the activity of emptiness. Compassion is the activity of selflessness. And this is where, as Kamala was saying the other night, wisdom and compassion become the two wings of the Dharma. They become the two wings of our lives. We live in their expression.

Compassion is the activity of selflessness.

And this is where, as Kamala was saying the other night, wisdom and compassion become the two wings of the Dharma. They become the two wings of our lives. We're living in their expression.

Let's sit for just a few moments.

Thank you. And if you don't keep sitting until you're fully enlightened, please notice why you move.

Thank you for listening.

Dukkha and Non-Self (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

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