Online Fundraising Event for Gaia House, with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:28:53

So it's great to be with you all. We would start with just a short meditation as a way of settling in, getting centered a little bit. We'll sit for about ten minutes.

Take a comfortable posture. Take a meditative posture, some posture that keeps you reasonably alert. As I'm sure many of you know, usually in this tradition we sit with the eyes closed, but of course it's also possible to sit with eyes open, looking generally downcast if that's what you're used to.

Settling in, taking a few deep breaths just as a way of settling into the body, becoming aware of the body, the body posture. Sit and know you're sitting.

A phrase that I found helpful to repeat occasionally as a reminder is the phrase that comes from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It's just the simple phrase: there is a body. I found using that phrase is a helpful reminder to simply settle into the awareness of the whole body. There is a body.

And as you're sitting within that framework—there is a body—you may become aware of the body breathing. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. It's that simple.

Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise, but an exercise in awareness. We can simply let the breath find its own natural rhythm. It doesn't have to be any particular way. We're simply mindful of the sensations, the feelings of each breath as it presents itself.

Within the framework of there is a body, you may become aware of other bodily sensations that call your attention. You can open to the feeling of those sensations, feeling them, noticing how they change, and returning to the awareness of the whole body and the body breathing.

Stay alert for the arising of any thoughts or images in the mind. As soon as you become aware that the mind is thinking, it might be helpful to make just a soft mental acknowledgement—thinking, or seeing if it's an image—as a way of supporting the mindfulness of the thinking process.

Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

Open to any predominant sensations that may be calling your attention. Opening to the sensations, feeling them, noticing their changing nature. And again, coming back and settling into the awareness of the body

and the body breathing.

Be aware of thoughts or images as they appear in the mind. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. And when you're ready, you can gently open your eyes. Be aware of seeing, just connecting with the world around you.

This afternoon, here in Barre, Massachusetts, I'd like to talk about different ways we can use our meditative understanding of our minds in dealing with some pretty unprecedented challenges that we all face in these times. There's so much going on in the world. Of course, there's the worldwide pandemic, which is having huge consequences for so many people's lives. There's all the stress of the political arena, certainly here in the States with this last election, and I imagine each place that you're living has its own political stresses. These circumstances can create all kinds of difficult feelings and emotions in our lives—perhaps fear because of the uncertainty of what's going to happen, or anxiety, or sometimes anger. Lots of different things can be coming up.

So I wanted to talk about four or five ways we can relate to our mind states in a way that helps us navigate these difficult emotions that may be arising and that we may be getting caught in—navigate them and actually have them be a source of greater insight into our own minds, really making them part of our path towards liberation. I'll mention four or five different strategies that I've been experimenting with and exploring myself in these times, because I think all of us in one way or another have been subject to the stresses of what is going on now.

There are a few basic principles that we can really apply in this situation. The first is looking to see what our relationship is to perhaps painful emotions that are arising—whether fear is arising, or anxiety, or sadness, or grief, whatever it may be. The first step in the meditative process, in seeing how we can work with these emotions in a way that leads to freedom, is to get okay with feeling them, to recognize that it's okay to feel them.

But this is often not our first response, because many of these emotions are painful and they're a source of suffering. Our first reaction might not be, "Oh good, let me open to this." Often there is resistance or aversion or contraction. It doesn't feel good when we're feeling anxiety or fear. So we need to remind ourselves that mindfulness means acceptance of the fact that they're there.

This points to quite a radical statement of the Buddha, which has always inspired me a great deal. It's very striking. He said that as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. I find that a very strong statement, because for most of us, we're very deeply conditioned to want and be attached to what's pleasant—we want more of it—and to have aversion or resistance to the unpleasant, pushing it away. This is really, one might say, almost the normal way of being in the world. We go for what's pleasant and we try to avoid what's unpleasant. The Buddha is pointing out here that this conditioned reaction, this conditioned response, just keeps us locked into patterns of suffering.

So there's a very strong instruction that we need to be mindful of pleasant and unpleasant feeling, which is, as many of you probably know, the second of the four foundations of mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, then mindfulness of feeling—and feeling here means pleasantness or unpleasantness. The first step, if we are experiencing unpleasant emotions in response to either what's happening in the world outside or in our own individual lives, is to remind oneself: it's okay to feel this. Let me open to it. Let me feel it.

Here we can begin to see the difference between the mindful experience of something unpleasant and aversion. We can experience unpleasantness—whether it's a physical sensation in the body or an unpleasant emotion—but if we're mindful, we are actually opening to the mindful experience of unpleasantness without reactivity. This takes some training, this takes some practice, because as I said, it may not be our first reaction to some painful experience. But it's okay. It's okay to feel it.

There's another point here which is related and which was very revealing for me in my own practice: understanding the difference between recognition and mindfulness. Often people conflate the two. We think that if we recognize what's present, it means that we're being mindful. But recognition and mindfulness are two really quite different things. We can recognize what's present through a filter of wanting or aversion or delusion. We recognize what's there—"Oh, yes, this is anxiety"—

This is fear. But we can be pushing against it or contracting in the face of it. So even though we're recognizing, we're not actually being mindful.

It's important to build on the recognition. We need to recognize what's there and then take the next step. Can I be with this without reactivity? Can I be open to it? Can I be with the unpleasantness with equanimity?

This is an important instruction, not only for these times of stress in the world, but for the whole unfolding of our meditation practice leading all the way to enlightenment, to awakening. Mindfulness of the unpleasant—it's okay. We can feel it. We can come close to it. And in that mindfulness, the mind is actually in a place of rest, of ease.

This is really important to examine, because as I say, the initial conditioned reaction will probably not be that quality of acceptance. Something painful comes and there's just this very strong conditioning not to like it, not to want it. So mindfulness of the unpleasant, and particularly of unpleasant emotions, painful emotions. It's really analogous to the same way we would be with the experience of pain in the body. As most of you know, most of you are probably experienced meditators, so you know that a lot of the practice is settling into the awareness of physical discomfort and it's okay. We can be mindful of that in an equanimous way.

There's another very interesting investigation we can make with regard to different emotions, particularly difficult emotions that may be arising in challenging times. And that is to see the relationship or the conditionality of thought and emotion. I found this to be extremely interesting, just watching in my mind

how a thought can appear—maybe it's a thought about the pandemic or a thought about a certain situation in our lives or even thoughts of different people. A thought can appear in the mind and quickly, almost immediately, that thought can trigger, can condition an emotion.

And it may be about something that is not actually happening in the moment. Rather, it's a thought about something. It may be a thought about a larger present circumstance, or a thought about something that happened in the past, or a thought about what might happen in the future. These kinds of thoughts arise, and it's very interesting to watch how thought appears and, often very quickly, there is an emotional response to that thought. I found it extremely interesting just to watch this play of thought conditioning emotion.

It works the opposite direction as well. Emotions can condition the arising of more thoughts, and so we stay in this loop. It's very helpful to be mindful of this process. If we can be mindful of the thought as a thought—the thought is not the actual situation, the thought is something arising in our own mind—if we can see it just as a thought, then even if it does trigger an emotion, which it might, but if we're mindful of that whole process, we're no longer so caught up or identified with the emotion. We begin to see it really as just this impersonal process going on. Thought arises, conditions emotion, but we're in that place of awareness, of mindfulness, watching the process and even taking interest in it.

So mindfulness of thought and how thoughts condition emotion is tremendously helpful. This takes some practice, because as I'm sure most of you know, thoughts are very slippery. We can be sitting open to the body, feeling the breath, and thoughts seem to just slide in. They don't have as much impact, as much tangible contact, as even a sound or certainly a sensation. They kind of slide in, and very often we're not aware for some time that we're even thinking.

Part of our practice is to set the intention—even as we're being mindful of the body and being mindful of the breath and sensations—to set the intention to stay alert for the arising of thought in the mind or the arising of image. We set that intention and it will help us perhaps become aware of them more quickly.

There's one Zen story which I really like, and it has tremendous implication for what I've been talking about. It seems there was this old Zen monk living up in a cave in the mountains of Japan. He was a great artist, and for some reason or other, he spent his time in the cave painting a tiger on the wall of the cave. He was such a brilliant artist, and the story goes that he spent a couple of years creating this painting.

And he did it with such skill, so realistic, that when he finally finished and looked at it, he got frightened.

We can perhaps smile at the ridiculousness of that—getting frightened at a painting on the wall of a cave. But actually, we do the same thing. Every time we are reacting to a thought in the mind about something that is not actually happening in the moment, that thought is like a painted tiger. We may have a thought about something that's going to arise in the future, or something that happened in the past. It's not actually happening now. We're simply having a thought about it, but we're not aware of it as a thought.

We take it to be real in a certain way, and then we have these big emotional responses to that thought. We are responding like that monk looking at the painting—he looked at the painted tiger and got frightened.

Now, it is helpful to distinguish between painted tigers and real tigers. It is possible he went outside of his cave and maybe there was a tiger, and he needed to take some response. So there are actual situations in our lives that need response, and we need to be aware of that. However, I would guess that the vast majority of times our minds are being reactive to one thing or another, they are really being reactive to painted tigers—these painted tigers in our minds.

It might be interesting for you to even use that as a soft mental note, a little mental label. If you're sitting or just going through your day, in the course of your daily life, and you feel like you're getting caught up in some unskillful mind state or emotion—whether it's worry or anxiety or fear or whatever it might be—then see: what is the thought that triggered that emotion? Is it actually a situation, an experience that is happening right now? Or is it simply a thought in the mind about something that either did happen or might happen, but is not happening in the moment? Then you might even make that little note: "painted tiger." It helps to free the mind from entanglement in this thought-emotion mutual conditioning, the one with the other.

I found this really helpful because, with so much going on in the world and how that affects all the experiences of our own individual personal lives, there's so much arising within us. We need to really develop some discernment about what's a real tiger, what's a painted tiger, what's the appropriate response. Is it helpful just to see it as a thought and let it go? If it triggers an emotion, can we be open to it even if it's unpleasant? Not only recognizing it, but being mindful—meaning non-reactive. It's okay to feel it, whatever it is: the anxiety or the fear or the uncertainty or the doubt or the worry. It's okay. "It's okay" has become one of my favorite mantras.

So, one approach is opening to the unpleasantness. Another is seeing the relationship of thought and emotion, and discerning what really needs responding to and what doesn't—what is simply a thought in the mind, recognizing that as such.

There will be times when we may do all of this, but still we're caught. For whatever reason, we're really in some kind of distress—emotional distress that sometimes translates into physical distress. Sometimes we may just be caught in this kind of storm in the mind. Something else that is very helpful to remember is that we can change the channels. If we are just immersed in the worry channel or the fear channel, and we try doing all these things—we try being mindful, we try opening—but for whatever reason at that particular time we don't have the capacity to extricate ourselves from the identification with it all, and so we're caught in some way, it's possible to change the channels in the mind.

Sometimes I think of the mind as just like watching TV, and with mindfulness it's like we're holding the remote. If we're on a worry channel or a fear channel, click the remote—how about going to a metta channel? Just starting to do some metta meditation. Or a compassion channel. We're taking the mind from

a place of suffering, from a suffering channel, to a channel of greater ease.

This is very helpful to do because once we have established a little more spaciousness within ourselves from having changed the channels—giving ourselves a little rest, a little respite from whatever storm was going on in the mind—we find some rest, we find some ease in a more skillful mind state, a more skillful channel. Then, after some time, we may feel that we have the inner strength or the inner resilience to open up again directly to the difficult emotion, or open up to the train of thoughts going through our minds without the reactivity, without getting lost in them.

Don't underestimate the value of this ability to actually choose what channel of the mind we want to be on. It's really a great strength.

So there's opening, being mindful of the unpleasantness—but it's okay to feel unpleasantness. This is part of our practice of really investigating and taking an interest in how thoughts condition emotion. As I said, I find it super interesting that we do this. Sometimes I might be sitting, and I'll have a thought about somebody—either someone I have a lot of love for, or someone I have some difficulty with.

And I'm just sitting there meditating, more or less trying to be mindful, and this thought comes—the person is not there. But just the thought of the person can trigger an emotion, one way or another. Painted tiger. We really want to practice this so we don't continually get caught. Changing channels.

There's one other aspect of being with thought that I want to mention, something I found tremendously liberating and interesting. When we're caught up in a long, elaborate thought process, we may try to be mindful, but somehow we're still hooked—we're being carried along. A very interesting question to ask, which very few people ever ask in their lives, is: What is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is the thought as a phenomenon?

At those times when we're having a whole train of thoughts, this is actually an easy time to investigate, because the thoughts are already there. If we can remember, even in the midst of it, to step back and ask the question—what is a thought?—it's super interesting. When we look directly at the nature of thought, we see that it's really little more than nothing. It's so insubstantial, and in a way, transparent. It's just this little energy blip arising in the mind. But we get seduced into a relationship with the content, and we miss the essentially empty nature of thought itself.

This is hugely helpful, because unnoticed thoughts—which are most of them in our lives—have tremendous power to condition and influence our lives. I call them the little dictators of the mind. The thoughts come: go here, go there, do this, do that. And we're just kind of the slaves of our thoughts. Yet when we become mindful and really look at what a thought is, we see that it's little more than nothing.

Once we understand this, it opens up a place of tremendous freedom. We're not so caught or imprisoned by this ongoing stream of thoughts that happen throughout the day. It provides space for discernment. When we have that understanding—that thoughts in their nature are empty, insubstantial, that in and of

themselves they have no power—we recognize that the only power thoughts have is the power we give them.

When we have this understanding increasingly through practice, it opens up the possibility for real discernment about which thoughts we should act on and which thoughts we should simply let go, let pass through. This doesn't imply inaction. Rather, it leads to a tremendous state of resilience and pliability of mind. It's another way we can work with the kinds of thoughts that may be arising during these times, but also in more ordinary times as well, because the same process is going on.

There are two more suggestions for how we can work with our minds in these times. The first is something the Buddha talked a lot about in the discourses: appreciating the value of concentration. Actually taking time to really develop the strength of concentration. This is a capacity of the mind, and regardless of where we're starting from, it can be developed.

I know this because when I started my practice, I had almost zero concentration. When I was at university, I studied philosophy. Afterwards, I went to the Peace Corps in Thailand, and then I was in India practicing for quite a while. When I first started, my mind was just thinking all the time—and enjoying it. The hour went quickly; I was entertaining myself. But there was almost no concentration.

It took me quite a while, and various practices, to develop some degree of concentration—enough that I could then really begin to use my mind in skillful ways, to truly investigate the nature of what was happening. For me, one of the ways of developing concentration that was quite effective in those early years was a six or seven week metta retreat, just doing loving-kindness, which is its own concentration practice. That was really the first time—after spending quite a long time having tried to just be mindful in vipassana mode, with my mind wandering a lot—that I did a sustained period of concentration practice. The mind developed enough strength and steadiness and stability to then re-engage with the insight practice on a whole different level.

There are many ways of developing concentration. You might find the approach that appeals to you or inspires you. It could be working with the breath. It could be working with metta. There are many different objects of concentration one could explore. It's said traditionally that concentration suppresses the defilements, which means that for that period of time when the mind is concentrated, the defilements are not operative.

Now, often we hear the word "suppress the defilements," and we think, "Well, I don't want to do that. Suppression is not a good thing." But this is not the unskillful kind of suppression. This is actually the suppression of simply putting unskillful states aside for a period of time in order to develop the strength of mind to then engage with them more skillfully. So actually, this putting aside of the defilements through the power of some degree of concentration can be a really skillful thing to do.

The last approach that I'd like to suggest in working with whatever challenges are coming up during these

times—and for some, they may be quite extreme, but I think for almost everybody, there's just a general feeling of tremendous uncertainty and difficulty with what's going on these days—is this: as different difficult emotions might get triggered and we find ourselves caught up in them, even after we may have tried some of the things I suggested, it's very helpful to remember, and to remember often, that whatever it is that's arising in the mind and the heart is impermanent.

Often when there's a strong emotion conditioned by powerful forces, either within ourselves or in the world outside, and it triggers some strong emotional response, a common tendency is to have the feeling that this is going to be here forever. It just feels like we're so in it, so immersed in it. And even though rationally we know that it's not, emotionally we have that feeling—if not the rest of my life, at least the rest of the week or the rest of the month. We forget or we don't remind ourselves that however strong the emotion might be, it is impermanent. It is not there all the time.

Even during a period of time where it may recur—maybe things are happening in your lives and the worry comes back again and again, or the anxiety comes back again and again—that doesn't mean that it's there all the time. Those emotions are there, and they're there for some time, and then we have other experiences, lots of other experiences that may be even neutral or even pleasant. And then perhaps the worry or anxiety comes back.

So both to remind ourselves of the impermanence, but in a way even more important, is to actually see the impermanence—to be paying careful enough attention. Even if we feel ourselves caught in what's happening, to be watchful enough so that we're in it and we're trying to be mindful. Maybe we are to some extent, but then lost. But if we keep really paying attention as best we can, we will see that at a certain point we're having a completely different experience. Maybe we're just out for a walk and enjoying nature, or maybe the mind goes just to the breath or being with the body, or we have other kinds of thoughts and emotions arising. It's all a flow of change.

This is so helpful to remember because it helps us really maintain a kind of balance and ease with the flow of changing phenomena.

So these are some of the different strategies that I've used during these times because, like many of you, it's impossible not to be affected by what's going on in the world. We all are. But our practice is to learn how to be with whatever our experiences might be, to really use it as the grist for our practice. We can learn. We can actually make it all part of the path and part of understanding the nature of suffering and the possibility of freedom right in the midst of the challenges, right in the midst of the difficulties.

It's like if the mind is suffering, can it pique your interest? What's going on here? How am I relating to what's happening that's causing the suffering? And so it becomes a very useful opportunity to really deepen our practice and our understanding.

I hope that some of these suggestions may be of help to you.

So just as an example, the other day a friend told me about some people who live near Barre in very difficult circumstances—they don't even have enough money for heat, and winter is coming. She's working hard to try to help this group of people. As she was telling me this, I so internalized that thought: "Well, how can I help?" And spontaneously, the response arose: "Oh, I can help out with just an offer of some generosity for these people who are local, who are right here, who need the help. What can I do?"

I think there's an immediacy and a simplicity if we hold it in that way, rather than trying to take on the whole big issue and then figuring out, "Oh my God, what could I ever do?"

So there's another piece to this. The first is just the simplicity of asking that question right in this situation: How can I help? Is there something I can do or not? And recognizing that sometimes there isn't.

The second piece—and this is a general principle with a lot of application here—is to act without attachment to the result, without expectation for the result, because so many different conditions influence how things are going to work out. We just have one small part of the whole big picture. We can do what we do and try to help in whatever way we can. But if we have an expectation for it to turn out a certain way, that is the setup for suffering, because it's outside of our control.

This applies a lot to our meditation practice as well. How often do we bring expectation to our meditation? We sit down with some expectation that we want it to be a certain way, and then it's not, and we get involved in all kinds of suffering because of that. Freeing the mind from that attachment to result is just tremendously helpful—which doesn't mean not doing things. We do respond in whatever way seems appropriate, but without that attachment. And I think you would find a lot greater ease then, and a lot more energy to continue to help, because you're not getting discouraged if the result is not exactly what you wanted it to be. It's quite workable, and it would be very interesting to explore these possibilities.

Question: What if the emotion is sorrow—particularly sorrow on behalf of the many people who suffer in the world, like people in refugee camps? What if it's not a painted tiger? What if it's real? And relatedly, how do we break the habit of news addiction? How do we relate to the suffering world?

In response to the first question, I think it points to really the first point I mentioned. Sorrow—it's not surprising that sorrow may be coming up, given what's happening in the world. And in a way it reflects a kind of open-heartedness, that we're actually letting it in and having that kind of response.

Then the question is: how are we relating to the sorrow? Are we drowning in it? Are we being overwhelmed by it? Or can we open to the feeling? We settle into the heart, mind, and body of it all and feel: "Oh, sorrow feels like this. This is what sorrow is about." But that's very different than being lost in it. It's almost like we're open to the feeling of it—we're really taking it in and feeling it, but we're relating in a way where we're not drowning, not being overwhelmed.

And then the sorrow could be the condition for compassion to arise. The cause for compassion to arise is a willingness to come close to suffering. If we're closed off to suffering, then the wellspring of compassion is

going to be blocked. It's only in our ability, our willingness to come close to suffering—either within ourselves or in the world—that becomes the prompt for compassion arising, and that sense of "Okay, well, how can I help?"

The feeling of sorrow, if we're relating to it in an open, mindful, aware way, could actually be the first step—because that sorrow is indicating that we're already willing to come close to the suffering. We are letting it in, which is why we're feeling the sorrow. But then instead of staying just with that, we can let it be the foundation for a compassionate response.

Thich Nhat Hanh had a wonderful phrase. He said, "Compassion is a verb." Compassion really implies some action that we take, whatever it might be—there's a response to the suffering. So I would just see the sorrow as a stepping stone to compassion and compassionate response.

In and of itself, I don't see sorrow as a difficulty. But it becomes a difficulty if we're not holding it in a skillful way—if we're simply getting identified with it and overwhelmed by it.

There's a teaching which expresses that there are two kinds of suffering: the suffering which leads to more suffering, and the suffering which leads to the end of suffering. All of that has to do with how we're relating to the suffering or sorrow that may be arising. Is it simply leading to more suffering, or is it leading to the end of suffering, which is that whole pathway of compassion?

In terms of the other question of just how much the news is impacting us these days—it is particularly strong here in the States these last couple of weeks with the election. It's been so intense. I noticed in myself, and in most of my friends, this endless checking on the news, ten times a day, checking in on the polls, whatever it might be. I realized how much agitation that was causing. And so I recognized the need to titrate the amount of information we're taking in, that we don't have to be engaging with it fifty times a day. Maybe once a day is enough, or twice a day. We're simply giving our whole system a chance to absorb what we really need to understand, but also allowing times of relief from that so we can establish some strength and equilibrium again before the next hit of news.

I think this is a situation very particular to our times and the technology. We're living in a new world where the technology is so pervasive and we're just bombarded continually by the news. We have to learn how to manage that in a skillful way.

Regarding hope, I think it would be worth investigating that mind state or feeling you're calling hope, because that word could cover a range of different experiences. Some kinds of hope have expectation embedded right within them. We think, "Oh, I hope this will happen," and it's flavored by the expectation that it will. As I just mentioned, that's going to be a setup for suffering, because there are many more forces at work determining whether something is going to happen or not.

Sometimes, within the Buddhist framework, hope and fear are linked, because hope is wanting something to happen and fear is a fear that it won't happen. Very often those two get linked together, and that's not

such a skillful approach.

The word I like, which I think might hold what you mean by hope in a more skillful way, is aspiration. I often use that word in contrast to expectation. We can have aspiration for many skillful things, and that aspiration is important because it sets our direction. If we have an aspiration and it's clear to us, then we can see what will be conducive toward that. But for me, that word doesn't have expectation embedded in it. It is simply the aspiration of what I feel or hope will be helpful or skillful. So I would just look carefully at what you're calling hope and tease out that part which is skillful and that part which is unskillful.

Regarding trauma reactions—collapse and overwhelm—this is an important subset of responses that we may be having. It takes a lot of care. I don't feel like I am actually an expert in working with trauma, although it does come up, of course, on meditation retreats, and I know how to work with it generally in that context.

What we've learned is the importance of really backing off somewhat from the trigger. Because if a trauma has been triggered and there is overwhelm, most of our experience has been that it's not wise to try to dig in deep and get to the bottom of it, trying to force a resolution. A lot more care is needed. A lot more gentleness is needed in the approach.

There are people who have done fantastic work in working with trauma. There's a recent book—I think the author's name is David Treleaven—something about mindfulness and trauma, where he really goes into quite a bit of detail about how to use mindfulness practice in working with trauma in a skillful way so it doesn't go to overwhelm.

What I would really say is that it does take care. I wouldn't try to push through it. I would look for some resources, either in person or through books, from people who have really developed a deep understanding of skillful ways of working with it. It takes a lot of care, and I would take that care with it.

So that's an interesting question. The quote from the Buddha was something like "anger with its poisoned source and honeyed tip." I think it's not difficult to relate to that, because often anger makes us feel strong and we feel right. There's often a kind of self-righteousness in it, and so there's a certain sense of power and strength coming from that emotion, which is very seductive.

I think it's really important, again, to be mindful of that, so that we're really watching our mind and discerning all of these different elements of the experience of anger. To experience mindfully what we're calling the honeyed tip—that surge of power or self-righteousness, whatever it is—we really recognize that and see that in the midst of the experience. And then also looking to what the Buddha called the poisoned source, the poisoned root, which means: can we see, in the midst of the experience, when we're in the middle of it, not only the honeyed tip but also the suffering aspect in this? And that is not hard to feel, because I think we can often feel the tightness or the contraction or the aversion or the separation, the distancing from either the situation or whoever we may be angry with.

There was another thought in my mind that just came and went with regard to this. I'll come back to it—a good ongoing teaching in impermanence, which, by the way, just increases with age.

Regarding teaching mindfulness to young children: not having young children or any children, I'm not sure I'm the best person to ask about this. As with the question about trauma, there are a lot of good books about this, so I would definitely investigate in that way. But the one underlying principle—and this is true both with children and everybody else—is that the most significant communication is not through what we say, but how we are. That is what's going to be communicated on the most basic and fundamental level. If we are mindful, if we are less reactive, if we are less judgmental, if we are less caught up in our own emotional stories, that is communicated to the kids, or to everybody around us. I wouldn't underestimate the power of that, because for me that seems the foundation.

On top of that, there are lots of exercises, mindfulness games for kids, and I would just explore the literature because there's a lot. Many of my friends work with kids in teaching mindfulness, and it's hugely successful.

There's one story that's just coming to mind. There was a mindfulness program in one of the rougher inner-city schools—I forget which city—where kids came from very challenging circumstances and were often involved with a lot of aggression and acting out at school. They did this mindfulness program, maybe a six-week program where they were teaching the kids mindfulness. The story is, something happened, there was an altercation between two kids, and one of the kids had pushed the other one up against the wall and was about to hit them. Then they paused, and the person said, "You should be glad I meditate," and stepped back from it.

In terms of efficacy, in terms of working with kids even in that rather challenging circumstance, it's quite amazing the effect it can have—just teaching some basic mindfulness skills. It's a beautiful thing to be sharing with kids, and I would certainly recommend that you explore that fully. There's a lot out there about how to do this.

Regarding the question about emotions: I do see it in the same way, although for the very reason you expressed—understanding the complexity of emotion, that it's not a single thing. Emotion is a whole complex of bodily sensations and thoughts and maybe images, the mental tone, the affect in the mind, and what distinguishes one emotion from another, what I call the specific coloration of the mind in different emotions. That's what makes it a little more difficult than the relatively simple—although not done very often—practice of asking, "What is a thought?" That's very simple and direct, and I think we can see it quite quickly.

One of the ways of seeing the empty nature of emotion is really to do just what you said, in terms of unpacking the whole experience so that we don't see it as some unified something, but rather as made up of many component parts. You might take it one by one. In the midst of some emotion, take some time and focus: what are the thoughts that are triggering it, or what are the thoughts that are expressing it? You

focus just on the thought aspect.

And then maybe take some time where you're focusing just on the physical sensations of it. As you dive in and explore the physical sensations, depending on the level of concentration, it becomes possible to see with increasing refinement the changing nature of the sensations. They're not as solid as they feel. The sensations within an emotion are continually changing and moving. By seeing that, again, it begins to break up the sense of solidity.

It is very interesting to go back to what I said in the talk in terms of really seeing the conditionality of thought and emotion—to see what triggered the emotion and just watch that process. I'll give you an example. When I first began to notice how quickly thoughts can trigger an emotion, I just got really interested in watching this. I remember I was going for a walk here in Barre, Massachusetts. At that particular time, there was some kind of meeting coming up—I think it was an IMS board meeting. This is quite a few years ago, so I don't remember the details, but there was some sense of foreboding because there was some big conflict going on that had to be resolved.

As I was going for the walk, a thought came about the meeting and immediately I could feel a little anxiety. I just watched it: the thought, then anxiety. It interested me so much, just seeing how one triggered the other. But then I started playing. I intentionally started thinking the thoughts to see how they triggered the emotion. I was just playing with this process in the mind, investigating it. In that way, in seeing the conditionality of thought and emotion, I could say, "Oh yeah, the thought—it was just a thought. That's all it was." Creating this complex response, and watching it go back and forth like that—that really weakens the sense of the emotion being something solid and fixed and substantial.

There's a phrase by a Sri Lankan monk who died recently, a renowned scholar and meditation master. He talked about things being "circumstantial, not substantial." I liked that phrase because it encapsulates the idea that there's nothing substantial. Rather, everything arising is circumstantial, meaning conditions come together and the experience is there; the conditions change and the experience changes. Seeing that circumstantial nature, the conditionality of it, also reveals the essentially empty nature. There is nothing substantial in it.

Also, as I mentioned a little earlier, just noticing the impermanence of it. Even when an emotion is really strong and we're in it, relating in whatever way we are—more mindfully or a little less mindfully—at a certain point it goes. Paying attention to its impermanence matters. The Buddha talked about how insight into impermanence is really the doorway to the understanding of anattā, or selflessness, or insubstantiality. So we can use our insight into impermanence in that way too.

I want to back up one minute. One of the things I've noticed in myself, which I've come to appreciate in my own practice and life, is that over all these years of practice, I've come to a point where—for the most part, it's not perfect yet—but for the most part, when I'm suffering in one way or another, it piques my interest. Rather than it being some struggle I'm drowning in, if I'm suffering, it really starts the question: "Well,

what's happening? What is going on in my mind that's creating the suffering?"

And it's never about an external situation. The situation may cause different emotions to arise within us, but how we're relating to that emotion is totally up to us. If we put the blame for how we're feeling on others, we're giving up our agency. We're really giving up our power. When we realize that different emotions are going to arise depending on what's going on, but how we relate to them is one hundred percent up to us—that's where the interest comes. How am I relating to what's happening that's causing suffering? That gets very interesting. We really look: Am I pushing something away? Am I attached? Am I clinging? Are there expectations? We can actually take the suffering to be the impetus for real investigation.

I've just found this approach hugely helpful in my life.

So with respect to relating to other people who may not be practicing mindfulness, and who may be caught in more unwholesome or unskillful mind states, two things come to mind. I think the first step does go back to what I mentioned earlier: in our interactions, not wanting them to be different. Because if that's the energy we're bringing to the exchange, it's not an inviting energy for communication.

I had this come up years ago when I was still in India—this goes back a long time now—but at times I would come home for a few months and spend some time with my mother. We had a pretty good relationship, and in fact, she was interested in meditation. But like all family dynamics, there were aspects where I thought, "If only she were a little less this or a little more that, she'd be so much happier." That was the attitude I started with, and it didn't work very well in terms of opening communication. If we just think about how we would feel if people were relating to us while wanting us to be different—very often, we just put up some kind of defense or close off a bit.

It was really amazing when I dropped back. As I said, we had a pretty good relationship, but I simply dropped back into accepting that this is how she is, and she'll probably stay this way. She's probably not going to change. When I got okay with that, when I became accepting of it, the whole relationship got so much easier because the energy between us was much cleaner. I wasn't always, even in a subtle way, pushing for a change. Once I cleared things up on my side energetically, I just relaxed with however she was being and how things unfolded. It was so much more easeful because I wasn't pushing against it. Then at times there were opportunities to engage in conversation in a more impersonal way—not "oh, you should really be different," but just genuine dharma discussion about different mind states and what might be skillful and not skillful. I think that's a big piece.

As for keeping equilibrium yourself in the chaos of dynamic relational situations—I think it is related to this, and again it goes back to expectation. If we have expectations for things to be a certain way and then they're not, we just get frustrated and fall out of equilibrium. If we're free of expectations, it's actually not that difficult. In a way, it's analogous to how we relate to pain in the body. An unpleasant interpersonal situation causing us distress is not so different. When there's pain in the body, at first, before people have

really developed some skill in practice, we don't like it and we push against it and want to change it. Maybe the last thing in our mind is, "Oh, I can just be with this. I can open to it—it's unpleasant, and that's okay. It's okay that it's unpleasant. My mind doesn't have to be reactive to the unpleasantness." It's the same thing in our interpersonal relations.

The underlying, very simple foundation, which I have found to be basically the bedrock of interpersonal interactions, is to be kind—just to be kind, in the way we speak, in the way we interact. When that's the bottom line for us, when that's the space we're coming from, even when it's challenging, even when at times we do need to respond or set boundaries, we can do so from kindness. It's not saying that we just have to sit back and let difficult or harmful situations roll over us. Sometimes it does take an active response, but are we doing it with kindness, or are we doing it out of anger or frustration?

We've talked a little bit about mettā meditation, loving-kindness. In that phrase "loving-kindness," I always like to emphasize the kindness part, because love is a very big word with many different meanings and interpretations. Often we wonder, "Am I loving enough?" or fear that we're not. Kindness, to me, is much more down to earth.

It's much simpler. We know when we're being kind or unkind. And to practice that heart of kindness—it's just a beautiful quality. I think it really is the basis for skillful relationships.

The Dalai Lama actually had a teaching on this. He said, "Be kind whenever possible. It's always possible." And I think that's really true.

I'd just like to thank all of you for joining at this time. It's really been great. I've had a lot of fun, and I hope it's been helpful to you in some way.

I also have a lot of appreciation for Gaia House and all the various centers, because it's really the institutions which are holding the framework of what makes possible the transmission of the Dharma. It's been this way since the time of the Buddha, whether it was the institution of the monastic sangha, which held the teachings, or in these days in the West, where it's often groups of lay Dharma practitioners. So I'm really glad to be of support also to Gaia House for the great work they're doing.

Thank you.

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