Dharma Transmission: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein and Dawn Scott

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:29:40

Buddhist studies.

Welcome, everyone. My name is William Edelglas. I'm Director of Studies at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Dawn, Joseph, and I are all speaking to you from a clearing in the mixed hardwood forests of Barre, Massachusetts, home of the Insight Meditation Retreat Center, the Forest Refuge, and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

Tonight, we'll be talking about Dharma transmission. In some classical Buddhist traditions, we hear of the Dharma being transmitted by the mountains, the waters, trees, the wind, birdsong. I felt something like this here in Barre. I have so much gratitude for the beech, the maple, the oak, birch trees, the ash trees, and so many of the other beings surrounding us here—the coyotes we hear at night, and the owls, the morning doves, the rabbits, chipmunks, and the waters that nourish us all and flow east to the Atlantic Ocean.

I want to acknowledge that this land was stewarded by the Nipmuc people, who for countless generations were living here amongst these trees. Many continue to live here. This area was traditionally known as Niponet. It's helpful for me personally to ground myself here in this place, remembering that there were people living fulfilling lives here long before the time of the Buddha.

This morning, one of my colleagues at BCBS mentioned that there were participants in this webinar from more than three dozen countries. It's really moving to me to think of us all grounded in the practices that we've inherited and grounded in the different places where each of us is situated now, coming together.

We're a small center, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. We only have 32 beds and we offer intimate residential retreats. For a number of years we've offered online programs. With the pandemic, it's been so beautiful for us to offer retreats, online courses, and programs like this to such a broad diversity of people with so many different practices, so many different experiences, so many different lineages. We offer the opportunity to learn some new practices, perhaps insight dialogue or exploring the relationship between Dharma and art, or writing a Buddhist essay, or doing a six-week program on studying the Pali suttas.

I think for Barre Center for Buddhist Studies—for many of us, as with many of the Dharma centers around the world today—we're exploring questions about how we remain grounded in the liberating wisdom and practices of the traditions we've inherited, even as we find ourselves also called to address the turbulence

and urgency of these times. This is a conversation that's been ongoing for us as a community, and I'm so glad, Joseph and Dawn, that you are joining us for this conversation.

I'll give you each a very brief introduction with the hope that in our conversation, you'll be able to share more of what might be relevant.

Joseph, you've been practicing Buddhist meditation since the mid-60s. Starting in the mid-1970s, you've been leading insight retreats and loving-kindness retreats in many places around the world. It was about that time that you co-founded the Insight Meditation Center, where you are still a guiding teacher. Some years after that, you co-founded the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and we're so grateful you've been on the board for so many years. In addition to your teaching retreats, you've written a number of books that have been Dharma gates, that have invited so many people onto the path to cultivate wisdom and an open heart. These include *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, *A Heart Full of Peace*, *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*, and *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*. Relevant to our conversation tonight, I've really appreciated seeing how you have been so supportive of so many young teachers. And on a more personal note, as a neighbor, I have found you to be funny and open-minded in conversation, and certainly for me, you've taken delight in playing with my daughters, which means a lot.

Dawn, you haven't been practicing for quite as long as Joseph, but you've been practicing for a long time. You've worked for many years at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center, and you are in the final year of the IMS teacher training program. You teach regularly at IMS and BCBS. As everyone in our communities knows, you've become a very well-respected and beloved Dharma teacher and are one of the lead faculty members for the joint program for IMS and BCBS that we will be starting next year, Love and Liberation, in 2022. We're so grateful that you will be continuing to spend part of the pandemic here with us in Barre.

Thank you so much, both of you, for joining us. Joseph, maybe you'd start by leading us in a short sit.

We'll just sit for five or so minutes. Take a comfortable, alert posture.

Usually in this tradition, we sit with our eyes closed, but it's also possible to sit with eyes open if you're accustomed to that. Maybe take a few deep breaths just as a way of settling into the body, landing here. Letting the breath now find its own natural rhythm. Be aware of your sitting posture. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. It's really that simple.

Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise, but an exercise in awareness and mindfulness. So we don't need to make the breath any special way. Simply being aware of it, each one as it presents itself, deep or shallow, long or short. We're simply mindful of each breath as it is.

You may notice where in the body you feel the breath most clearly. Is it the air passing the nostrils or the movement of the chest or the abdomen? Or is it throughout the whole body? Simply to notice.

You might become aware of other sensations in the body that call the attention. Open to the feeling of

those sensations, feeling them, and also noticing how they change. They get stronger or weaker, shift position. And then settling back into the awareness of the whole body and the body breathing.

Also stay alert for the arising of thoughts or images in the mind. It's sometimes helpful to make a very soft mental acknowledgment, a mental note—"thinking," or "seeing" if it's an image. Noticing how the thoughts and images also arise and pass away. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

Thank you, Joseph. I was thinking we would start with each of you sharing something about how the Dharma was transmitted to you, how you came to the Dharma, and situating yourselves a little in this conversation in a more singular way. Maybe Joseph, you could start us off.

Well, it's going back quite a few years now to 1966 or so. I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I'd finished college and studied philosophy at school, then went off to the Peace Corps. And at a certain point, I started attending discussion groups led by two Buddhist monks for Westerners who were living in Bangkok.

It was an interesting meeting. They were held at a quite famous marble temple, this beautiful temple. There was a group of maybe twenty or so people, Westerners. And the monks were giving the basic teachings. But having studied philosophy, I went there and I was asking so many questions that people stopped coming because they were getting so annoyed with me. I think out of desperation, one of the monks said, "Why don't you try meditating?"

Of course I was young—twenty, twenty-one years old. First time in Asia, it was all very exotic for me. I didn't really know anything about Buddhism, didn't know anything about meditation. So he gave me just the very basic instructions, kind of as we did just at the beginning here. You know, sitting down, being with the breath, noticing what's happening.

So I got all my paraphernalia together and kind of sat. And I set my alarm clock for five minutes because I didn't want to sit too much. But it was really quite amazing. Something very significant happened even in that first five minutes. It's not that it was any great enlightenment experience. But what happened was that I saw there was a way to look into the mind as well as looking out through it—that there was actually a methodology for looking inwards.

I was just so excited by this because going from the study of philosophy, which seemed very external and academic, and here was this very immediate, direct way of looking at one's own mind—I got so excited by this that I started inviting my friends over to watch me meditate. That didn't last very long. But that's how revelatory it was for me.

After my Peace Corps days, I came back to the States and tried to practice on my own. But it got very confusing. I really hadn't had very detailed instructions.

And so I was just mixing up a lot of different things. And I realized then that I needed a teacher. And I got

motivated to go back to Asia. I ended up in India, and after traveling around a bit, ended up in Bodh Gaya, which of course is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, where I met my first teacher, Anagarika Munindraji.

He said something just when I met him that was so striking to me. It really hooked me in my Dharma practice, and it reinforced what I had learned in my first five minutes. He said, "If you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it."

It was that simple. There was nothing to join. There were no rituals and no ceremonies. It was just: if you want to understand your mind, observe it. And it made so much sense. It was just such common sense. That really motivated all these years of practice. That was really the beginning of it.

I'm actually, as I listen to you, Joseph, I'm really struck by just how our entry points were similar and yet so different. You had to go to Asia to connect with a teacher, whereas I just had to travel thirty minutes from my house to connect with the Dharma and didn't have to leave the United States at all. It's a testament to what your generation brought back and helped seed here, which had started to bloom and was ready for someone like me.

My entry into Dharma was a boy, and that boy and I are still together—sixteen years now. My Dharma partner had been a factor, actually. I was in school, and we were apart nine months out of the year. Then I would come back for about three months during the summer, so we had twelve weeks together. He told me that he would be volunteering at the family retreat at Spirit Rock. And I thought, we only have twelve weeks together—why do you want to go away and volunteer at a family retreat to serve as a mindful leader?

He said, "Well, why don't you come? You really enjoy children. You love families. Why don't you just come?"

And I thought, no, I might like it. I might enjoy it. And to my horror, I hated family retreat. I hated it. The irony of all this is that three years later, I ended up serving the family program at Spirit Rock as the family program coordinator. I was raised in the Dharma by all those families, all the staff, all the teachers. But at that first retreat, I thought the songs were saccharine. I thought the art projects were saccharine. Everyone's talking about their feelings and doing all this meditating.

But there was a moment in front of the dining hall at Spirit Rock. I was with Ajahn Amaro, and he asked me what I thought of the retreat. I was just straight up with him. I said, "I hate it. It's too saccharine. It's too goody-goody."

He was very patient with me and said, "Yeah, it's like a goodness camp, isn't it?"

There's a way in which he took my word "goody-goody" and turned it into "good"—all the judgment that

I'd filled that word with—and reminded me, or invited me, to feel into the goodness that was actually there. I remember how clear his eyes were, how curious they were. They've closed this trail at Spirit Rock now, but there used to be a trail that connected the picnic tables right outside the dining hall, and it led up to the meditation hall. My memory is that he didn't have any shoes on, that he was just walking up this path. And I thought, he hardly has anything, and yet he seems so happy and alive and curious.

That made an impression on my heart—left an indelible impression on my heart.

And the retreat is working on me and my heart softening.

There's this very beautiful ritual at the end of family retreat where the volunteers and teachers create two parallel lines and bow in the families as they walk into the meditation hall. I came face to face with a mother who was weeping, radiating this unabashed gratitude. Something happened for me. To this day, I don't quite understand what happened, but my heart just opened—and my sweetheart knew when to come in. He said, "Well, do you want to sit a retreat? There's a young adult retreat that's going to happen."

I sat that retreat, and Diana Winston offered a teaching on the eight worldly winds, using the Buddha's quest for awakening on the night of his enlightenment as an archetype we could all relate to. After that talk, I remember thinking: I could be doing everything perfectly, and the eight worldly winds will still be blowing through my life. I just felt like the pressure was off. I wanted to know more. I wanted to practice.

So I went back to school and practiced. Then I'd come back to Spirit Rock in the summers to volunteer—for family retreat, because I'd fallen in love with it by then, and for the young adult retreat, and for the Abhayagiri Teen Weekend. Then back to school again.

When I graduated, I remember being on the phone with my mentor, telling her I didn't want to continue with school—I just wanted to sit retreats. She asked, "Have you ever thought of sitting a long retreat, like a month long?" I said, "Do you think I could do that?" And she said, "Of course you can." Sometimes that's all you need—someone who believes in you and encourages you.

I sat that retreat and started working at Spirit Rock. I'm very grateful to them because they allowed me to continue working while also giving myself to the practice and sitting retreats there. So that's the entry in.

Go on, you inspired me. I want to go on retreat. Maybe we can go on retreat together. We're not far away. Thanks so much, Dawn.

So the theme of our conversation is Dharma transmission. If you could pause for a little while and try to help us understand what we're talking about when we talk about Dharma transmission—the overarching question being: how do these liberating practices and wisdom that we've inherited apply to these times? How do they speak to these times? Is that what we're really talking about with Dharma transmission?

Well, I think it might be good to clarify what we mean by Dharma. That's the Sanskrit version—in Pali, Dhamma—but it's a word with a broad range of meanings. The most general would be nature, or the laws

of nature. In that sense, as you mentioned in the introduction, nature can be a great teacher, and so there can be a transmission of that.

More specifically, and in our context, Dharma often means the teachings of the Buddha as he explained the laws of nature. When we talk about Dharma transmission, generally we're talking about the transmission of the teachings and the experience that come from practicing them—teachings that originated with the Buddha and have been passed down for 2,600 years. That itself is remarkable: that there has been a continuity of transmission from the time of the Buddha until today. They've maintained such clarity and have as much meaning for us now as they did all those centuries ago. I find that quite extraordinary.

And then there's the whole question of skillful means—how to impart the teachings. Different lineages, traditions, and teachers all have their own particular style of conveying them. I think that's what we're all involved in. We're all part of this chain of transmission going back to the Buddha's time.

And that can be pretty daunting. I remember once, when I was a fairly new teacher, I was leading a retreat in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, and giving a Dharma talk under the Bodhi tree. That was the most difficult, challenging talk I have ever given.

I'm so glad that's not part of the teacher training! Thank you so much for not including that.

Actually, this is a good idea, Maggie. You did it for us.

It was so challenging because it was as if the Buddha was sitting behind me listening to all my little Dharma jokes.

But it does reflect this whole idea of transmission and continuity over the years. It's interesting, Joseph, when you talk about just being a part of this chain, this passing down of these liberative teachings through the generations. I feel like the teacher training is a transmission of sorts, in that way. And this training has gone by so fast, yet we're still in it. We've got a couple more trainings and then it culminates in our graduation.

There's so much that has been transmitted to us by everyone on the faculty. I just wonder, are there things that you would long for us to continue to be in relationship with and pass on, if we continue teaching the next generation of practitioners and teachers?

In a way, for me, the most powerful part of the transmission in the training is the emphasis—which I hope got conveyed—on the critical value, the necessity, of all of us continuing our own practice. That's actually where the teaching comes from. The teaching comes out of our own practice and experience, this verified faith that's derived through our continued practice.

I feel like our cohort has been dedicated to that. We just love to practice. You send an email to someone in our cohort and inevitably you get back these replies of "I'm on retreat for a couple of months." I feel like

that commitment was there before we started the training, and the training has emphasized and conveyed that even further.

I think one of the challenges is going to be—and I see this in the whole transmission of the Dharma in the West and everything that's evolved over these last forty or so years—that there's such interest and such demand for the teachings that it's very easy for teachers to get so busy sharing the Dharma that sometimes one's own practice can fall by the wayside. We want to be giving, serving, and helping. And so that's a danger, really. I find for myself it's been invaluable to carve out a good chunk of time every year.

Actually, I was really inspired by something you had said years ago. I think you had come to Spirit Rock to teach the July Insight Retreat, and you talked to the staff. I remember you talking about the fact that you take anywhere from two to three months to practice every year. I was so inspired by that. To this day, when William, Jill, and I are planning a program, part of scheduling has been really respecting the fact that we've set aside time to be away practicing.

That's really important. What else do you teach from?

There's one other aspect of transmission that I think is really important, and I think it was instilled in me by my first teacher, Munindraji. I met him when I went to Bodh Gaya. He had just come back from, I think, nine years in Burma, where he had done a lot of practice and the whole teacher training there. But he also devoted five or six years to thorough study of the texts—the complete suttas, the Abhidhamma, the Vinaya, all the commentaries. He was totally immersed in the teachings of the Buddha, and he taught that way. Even when he was teaching meditation, it was all embedded in the larger context of the whole teachings and the suttas.

Mahasi Sayadaw, who was his teacher, was also one of the great practitioner-scholars. So there's one stream of teachers who have really combined both study and practice. For myself, I've found that so helpful, because the Dharma is always much vaster than our own individual experience. We may have powerful, transforming experiences, but the Dharma is vast. It's the study aspect which can actually open up so many of those doors.

It's so interesting—I had heard about this interplay between study, reflection, and meditative development. I heard people talking about it, but I didn't know that the Buddha had actually named it as a way of deepening our understanding of Dharma: *suta mayā paññā*, *cintā mayā paññā*, and *bhāvanā mayā paññā*. It was wonderful to see it in the suttas. But my own relationship with it really was the meditative practice, the meditative development, that called me first.

I was pretty shy of the suttas. I mean, those are some big volumes over there. They seem pretty intimidating. It really wasn't until I felt the relationship between what the teachings were actually saying in my own practice that the suttas came to life for me.

I remember it was my second long retreat. Guy was giving a talk—I forget what he was giving a talk

on—but he was using an excerpt from the Honeyball Sutta. And I just liked it. For some reason, it just appealed to me. So I wrote him a note asking, "Can you just give me that part of the sutta?" I know we're not supposed to read, but I was an undisciplined yogi during that second long retreat that I sat.

So I was just reading that portion of the sutta, not the whole thing, and I'd read it over and over again, not realizing that I had memorized parts of it. It was just in my frame of reference, in the background. And I remember sitting and then seeing my own mind doing what the sutta had described. It just strengthened my faith in the teachings—to see it so clearly. And the gratitude I had to the Buddha: "You figured this out all on your own. You didn't need a Buddha. You figured this out." It strengthened my faith. Really strengthened my faith.

*Joseph:** There's a really important point here, and I love that story of how we can internalize the teaching and then actually have it come up in our meditation at particular times. I think that points to something which may sometimes be misunderstood. When we read the Buddhist texts or the discourses, it's easy to read it as Buddhist philosophy. We have various views of it, we agree or we don't agree. But really all the teachings, all the suttas, are instructions. It's not philosophy—it is philosophy in a way—but really the Buddha is just telling us: do this and you'll experience some results.

Just one suggestion for people who are watching and listening now: if you'd like to get a taste of how intertwined study and practice can be, I would recommend any of the discourses of Mahasi Sayadaw explicating a sutta. You could probably find these online. He wrote a lot, but he also wrote quite short booklets on individual suttas. It's amazing how he uses the sutta and, in his discourse, applies it to the meditation practice. It's quite an amazing interweaving of study and practice, and it might give you all a flavor of the potential of that.

*Interviewer:** I'm curious—how in the teacher training, or what either of you think is the role of teaching study or studying in the transmission of the Dharma?

*Joseph:** I feel it's really important because it also provides a reference point. But I want to back up a little bit.

In teaching and being in this line of transmission going back to the Buddha up until now—it's a huge responsibility. It's not a trivial undertaking, on a few different levels. On one level, people come and really entrust their hearts and minds to us as teachers. People get into a very open and sometimes vulnerable place. So there's a huge responsibility there. To be as grounded as possible in as deep an understanding of the Dharma as possible—I think that's one way of fulfilling that responsibility.

It also provides a reference point for our own latest ideas about practice.

*Alexis:** Say that again, Joseph. I missed that. Our what?

*Joseph:** Our own latest ideas.

*Alexis:** Okay.

*Joseph:** We can be going along, practicing, and we have lots of different inputs and influences. "Oh, this sounds great."

I'm going to bring this into the teachings. And often it's great, often it's wonderful. But sometimes it may be a little off from the real teachings of the Buddha. So in the context of transmitting the Buddha's teachings, I think there really is a responsibility to know in as much depth as possible what they actually are.

There's something online—I don't know if it's a blog—called "Did the Buddha Really Say That?" And it examines a lot of things that are getting expressed these days. Very commonly someone will introduce a teaching with, "Oh, the Buddha said such and such." It's a fascinating study. Whoever this person is goes back and checks: well, did the Buddha really say that? And more often than not, no. It's a great study—just that real grounding that I think is so, so helpful.

One of the trainees shared, "I actually feel like as trainees, the suttas have helped us bond in a way. We create these study groups and we're exchanging ideas and we're talking about them and trying to understand them. It's been a way for us to connect and deepen our understanding while also deepening our connection to each other."

That's a great thing to be doing.

Another trainee raised a question: "Joseph, you had used the term skillful means earlier—that as a teacher, one tries to find skillful means to teach what is an appropriate supportive practice for the students. And skillful means can also be a term that would allow a teacher to address some things which maybe the Buddha didn't address explicitly, but that as contemporary practitioners and teachers we face. Whether it's the challenges of living in a hyper-connected world—iPhones, cell phones, the internet—or other challenges of what it means to live as an ethical person. What would right livelihood or wise action or wise thinking be in the context of climate change, or the kinds of challenges that liberation movements are trying to address—racism, sexism, the way we make certain kinds of bodies the norm, whether racially or by gender or ability? There are these two foundational Buddhist doctrines of impermanence—that everything is changing—and dependent origination—that everything is dependent on causes and conditions. And our life as practitioners and teachers, the situation we find ourselves in right now, is indeed dependent upon all the causes and conditions of our thinking and our lives. I'm curious what you think is the skillful role for a teacher today to address some of what feels very urgent to many practitioners."

I think there are different levels of understanding that question. On one level, I think the Buddha did address all of it, because the root cause of the kinds of situations and problems that you mentioned—that we face in our society—the root cause of suffering is greed and hatred and delusion. So on the most

fundamental level, when we're helping people understand how those forces work in the mind and how they manifest, we're addressing the essential issue. How does greed manifest in all the choices we make in our lives and that society makes? How does fear and anger and hatred manifest? We can see it being played out in so many different ways.

So the two levels are: on one hand, a more formal Dharma practice can really be addressing the root causes of all the kinds of suffering that are out there. And then on another level—we might call it socially engaged Buddhism—we're really engaging in specific arenas of difficulty and suffering in the world. We see, really out of compassion for the suffering, "What can I do? How can I help in this situation?"

But I feel it's really important to connect those two. As practitioners of the Dharma, as we engage in addressing the problems that we face, it should be rooted in the deeper understanding of the root causes. And that's where the Buddhist teachings are just so powerful.

I'll give you an example of what happens when we don't do that. For many years—this goes back a way—I was teaching retreats for environmental and social activists. These were people on the front lines of social engagement doing great work. The problem that was most commonly brought up in those retreats was burnout. And one of the reasons for burnout is that sometimes people try to address these problems from anger. That's their fuel.

They get really angry, and it's understandable because there are so many situations of oppression or injustice, so many arenas where when we face them we can feel the anger coming up. That emotion, as a message that something needs to be done here, can be valuable. But it's not a sustainable energy for continuing action because it burns us up—we get burned out.

And so there was a very interesting discussion on these retreats about how to transmute the motivation of anger as the source of action to compassion as a source of action. We could take the same actions out of compassion for the suffering that's there, rather than out of anger at the perpetrators. And it's a completely different mind state, a completely different heart space, and much more sustainable. It actually brings a greater result.

So that's why I think these two levels really work together. They're not distinct in my mind.

*Speaker 2:** What you're saying about having the fuel of our engagement with the world and wanting to affect change at a societal level coming from compassion as opposed to anger—it reminds me so much of King's third principle of Kingian nonviolence. I'm not crazy about the language, but I just love the spirit that's embedded in the words. It says, "We attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil." We're looking at deconstructing the conditions that have led to systemic harm, not making an opponent out of the personalities.

*Speaker 1:** That's beautiful, and I feel that's really in alignment with the whole transmission of the Dharma. And actually, that's what we as Dharma practitioners can contribute to social engagement,

because not everybody understands that, or is even aware of the possibility of it. Because as is probably obvious to all of us, it's not necessarily easy to let go of anger. It takes practice to move from anger to compassion. So that takes a real practice. And that's definitely a contribution that these teachings can make.

*Speaker 3:** I love the word that you use—transmuting. Transmuting the anger into compassionate action. I think it's a question that's really up in our communities, our practice communities right now. Because as you were saying, William, during the introduction, we're living in times that are very turbulent and very urgent. The climate crisis and racial injustice and gender equity and dismantling patriarchy... And I think it's beautiful that people are asking, "How can the Dharma—what does the Dharma have to say to this? How can we use the Dharma to address these things?"

What comes up for me is this term that's been floating around. I guess I started hearing it maybe two, three years ago—this phrase "collective liberation." And I see the both of you smiling.

*Speaker 1:** Well, I have questions about this too.

*Speaker 3:** I have questions about it too. I'm in process around it.

*Speaker 2:** What does that even mean?

*Speaker 3:** Exactly. I've been wondering that. What does it mean? And I think if we're talking about large groups of people waking up in the ways that are defined in Buddhism—I don't quite... that doesn't feel realistic to me. In order to come here to Barre, I had to drive cross country, and I just felt how vast this country is and the different kinds of people in it and the different ways that we live. So when we say collective liberation, are we talking about—would it include other religions and other practices from other backgrounds? What do we mean by this?

Is it possible for a dedicated group of people who want to affect change at the societal level, who are inspired by and using the teachings of Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, as inspiration and fuel? That seems possible to me. And I think we saw it in the civil rights movement. We saw a dedicated group of young people trained by an older generation in Kingian, Gandhian, nonviolent action. They studied it. They trained in it. They practiced it. And it was fueled by this deep Christian ethic of love. And their effort—we're here together because of their efforts, right? They impacted us in such beautiful, profound ways that still have this lasting impact.

So I think a group of people inspired by the teachings of the Dharma, where the teachings of the Buddha would inform the *how* of social action—how to actually engage at this level—I think that's possible. Is it possible for, say, a group of ten or twenty people who actually want to metabolize the ways that they've been acculturated to relate to women, to relate to people of different races, and see the defilements and actually see through those defilements and metabolize them—through, just to use the Buddhist language, repeatedly seeing with wisdom? I hope that's possible. And I know of groups who have come together with

that as their goal. We'll see what happens.

I so want collective liberation to be a reality.

I think one of the issues or clarifications that's needed is just an understanding that the word liberation can have many different meanings. Very similar to the word desire. Because very often in teaching, it's commonly understood that desire is the cause of suffering. And in Pali, there's a very specific word for that kind of desire—clinging and grasping and craving. But in English, we use the word desire in many different ways. Desire can be wholesome. There's a desire to be more compassionate or more loving or awakened. And I think liberation has that same range of meanings in English.

So when we use a term or a phrase like collective liberation, in order to actually come to some common understanding of it, anybody using that term would have to define: what do you mean by liberation? Are you meaning, in the classical Buddhist sense, the uprooting of the defilements of the mind? Or are you meaning, as you suggested, helping to alleviate a lot of the causes, the symptoms of the greed, hatred, and delusion as they're manifesting in the world?

It seems very unlikely to me that there will be universal collective liberation.

You can make it happen, Joseph. You can do it!

But we can move in that direction, certainly. I mean, if the Buddha couldn't do it, I'm trying to stay a little bit realistic here. But we can be going in that direction. That can be our aspiration. I do think it is a traditional aspiration of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is precisely the one whose aspiration is to support universal liberation.

I wonder if there are different ways of thinking about the term collective liberation that might be more consonant with, complementary to, the more traditional view. Here's one way of thinking about it that I think some people might be sympathetic to.

If it's the case that we're always conditioned by the communities that we live in, by the language that we speak, by the social practices that we're caught up in—which at some point I think we are, even though we may be liberated from that at some point—then each of us is caught up in ways of thinking and social practices which lead to the suffering of other people. To use the examples that Dawn was thinking about: patriarchy, sexism, racism, environmental challenges.

To the degree that we are participating smoothly in these without bringing some kind of critical awareness to those ways of thinking—can we really practice wise thinking? Can we practice wise action? Can we practice wise speech? Can we practice wise livelihood if our thinking is caught up in social practices and a language that does violence to some people?

So collective liberation in that sense is: I need to liberate myself from a whole variety of ways of talking and thinking that I'm just born into and take as a natural given, as opposed to recognizing them as social

practices. And I can't really practice all the steps on the Eightfold Path until I have done the kind of critical work that would allow me to practice wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise thinking.

Some people who would defend the use of the term collective liberation would say: if you really want to practice wise action and wise speech, having some critical awareness of the ways in which language can harm people would be necessary. And that is a social practice. That's a collective practice, that kind of critical work. So for me as an individual to be liberated requires doing some of that practice together.

I think that's what some people might say in response—not that collective liberation means everybody will be liberated together, or even necessarily that large groups of people will be liberated together, though there's another way some defenders of the term might speak. But what I'm articulating might even be more consonant with an individual being liberated, while recognizing that it requires this work to be done with spiritual friends and others.

In community, yes. I know groups of people who are dedicated to that right now, who are taking that up.

I want to offer an additional comment because I agree with that, and it's really inspiring. As you've expressed it, I think you've expressed it really beautifully. It really is the overcoming, the seeing through the delusion that's in our minds in all these areas. And so I see that as being very much part of our practice. But I'd also like to put in a plug for all those people who may—and there aren't many of them—but all those people who may be

sitting in a cave someplace, practicing with the aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all. I think of the Bodhisattva, the Buddha, before his awakening. How many lifetimes did he spend not engaged in social interaction, but off by himself cultivating—in certain lifetimes anyway—cultivating the paramis that come from solitude, like deep concentration. I think that's also part of a path to liberation.

So as much as I value and also try to practice everything you said, I have a lot of respect for people who do take themselves apart, who really practice maybe by themselves or in a very small community in a very intensive way. And to me, that is as much social action as being on the front lines of engagement. I wouldn't separate them. I think there are different expressions of wanting to alleviate the suffering of all.

For many of us, especially those of us who are laypeople, we are living in the world and involved. And so I have a lot of respect and appreciation for that, exactly as you described it. In all the work that we've done at IMS and in that community here at BCBS—the work on ongoing racism—we've been doing that and trying to explore and understand it for maybe ten or more years now, and it's been hugely opening for me. It's been one of the most powerful experiences of these last years. So I see, personally, the tremendous value of that.

And I also appreciate the Bodhisattva before he became Buddha. We're benefiting from his time in the cave 2,600 years later. So to me, what he was doing then was as much social action in terms of benefiting others as what we're doing now as we're engaged in society. I'd just like to bring in that aspect as well. But

I see it as both.

*Sebene:** I'm deeply sympathetic to that. I remember living in Dharamsala, in India—one of the things that I loved was looking up and seeing people who had been sitting in caves for ten years or fifteen years, and being neighbors with a guy who had spent twenty years in a cave. There's something about being near such a person. I feel that to some degree with Bhikkhu Analayo, our neighbor here. There's something deeply inspiring about that commitment to practice that I find very moving.

I want to follow up on this comment you just made, Joseph, about how transformative it's been for you and how much you've learned. I guess I want to pose the question to both of you: In what way might that opening not just change social practice at IMS—language, structures of retreat—but might also change in some way the teaching of the Dharma or the transmission of the Dharma? What does it mean that we have a group of yogis coming on retreat and a group of teachers who come with very different racialized, gendered experiences? In what way does that impact how the Dharma is taught, and how does the Dharma speak to a much more diverse group of people?

*Spring:** You see this already happening in my cohort. Some of them were at the BIPOC retreat at IMS this summer.

*Sebene:** You want to say what BIPOC refers to?

*Spring:** Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. A lot of words. And it was such a blessed retreat, partly because it was right after George Floyd was murdered, so it felt good to come together. Also, of the six teachers, five were from the IMS cohort. I've gotten to spend the past three years with them, but to feel the Dharma moving through them in the way that is particular to them was very, very moving.

What really comes to mind is Andrea Castillo, who talked about how just speaking the Dharma in Spanish changed her teaching. I don't remember all the details, but I remember her describing how her teaching was transformed because she was working with predominantly Hispanic women.

I see it in my own teaching too. What's happening is we're using the specifics of our culture as a gateway to our exploration of these liberative teachings. For instance, I recently offered a talk where part of it explored fostering empathy through using your imagination in ethical, moral ways, and I brought in a scene from *A Raisin in the Sun*. It was very personal, but also using the particular to get to these universal teachings.

The reason I was inspired to do this is that Dara and I had gone for a walk, and we were talking about how African Americans—just given our history in this country—in order not to fall into despair or bitterness, we've had to cultivate the Brahma Viharas. For real. And in that moment in the play, Mama is using compassion and compassionate action to save her family from the gravitational pull of internalized racism.

So I feel like we're bringing in the stuff of our culture to make the teachings come alive and illustrate them in ways that feel personal—that will connect with other people who look like me, who look like Andrea Castillo.

*Joseph:** Everything you just said so beautifully was precisely the motivation for this last teacher training cohort.

Just maybe some of the people listening know, but the idea behind this particular training was to train more people of color to be teachers for exactly the reason you're saying—to be able to express from the inside, coming from your own personal experience of the place we live, in everything that is, and realizing the need for that. Teachers have to be able to manifest that and show that.

It's beautiful.

I just remember the first time I heard someone quote James Baldwin in a Dharma hall, and I wept. It meant so much to me. It was like, oh, I can be here. I can fully bring more of myself into this hall.

It's a beautiful thing.

We got about halfway through the questions I was thinking of asking, and we're going to move to some final comments at closing. But I'm wondering if either of you have any last thoughts or questions for each other, thoughts that you'd like to share.

I do have a question for you, Joseph, and maybe I'll just ask you offline, because I think it would open up like forty-five minutes worth of material. It has to do with something I noticed—I was listening to one of your first talks that's on Dharma Seed. You probably were giving talks before then, but this was July of 1974.

Maybe we'll have a part two of this, I don't know. But I was curious—maybe you can speak to this in two minutes or something. In listening to the talk, I was struck by how much has not changed in terms of how you offered the teachings. There was this comprehensive understanding that you just felt was underneath what you were sharing. There was your characteristic clarity. There was your concern—you were offering liberative teachings and you still do that. But there are ways in which you were different too. And I'm curious: how would you characterize the way that you've changed over the years?

I'm very aware of at least one aspect of that change. And I think this has been true in terms of my teaching in Dharma, but this movement has also been acknowledged more generally in society as people get older. So it's some combination. I knew a lot more then than I do now. I was much more convinced that everything I knew was right back then. And so it was grounded very much in the teaching, so I think I didn't go too far off, but there was that energy of, "Yeah, this is how it is."

Over the years—and I think it's partially just aging and getting older, but also a fruit of the practice—there's been a letting go of attachment to views. It doesn't mean that we don't have our views

and ways of understanding, but the grip of attachment to them has really loosened a lot, and it's made me a lot happier.

It's wonderful you mention that because now when you teach, one of the things I associate with you is how much you laugh. There wasn't a lot of laughter in that first talk.

No, no. That's an indication. So I recommend this to everybody: you don't have to wait until you're 76. We can have various understandings but without the certainty that they are the absolute truth.

Thank you. And it does make for a much more engaged conversation, where we really can learn from one another, when we have that openness.

It just puts people at ease.

Yes, it's a wonderful entry. Something we can all look forward to with aging.

Joseph, maybe this would be a good time to say a few words.

One aspect of transmission I was thinking about—we think back to the Buddha establishing the monastic order as a structure and an organization. I find it totally remarkable that this same organizing structure has lasted 2,600 years. This order of nuns and monks, and we could also include the lay people.

And one of the powers of the structure of the monastic order was that they really were the container for preserving the teachings. The reason that they're available to us now, that we can practice them, is because they were held by all these generations of nuns and monks and the monasteries for thousands of years. It's quite extraordinary.

What's happening now, particularly in the West, is that lay people are carrying a lot of that responsibility of holding the teachings, preserving the teachings. This is quite new, actually, in the history of Buddhism. It's mostly been the monastic orders. So something quite different is happening now in our society and in the transmission of the Dharma.

One of the things that makes it possible for us as lay teachers to be holding and preserving the teachings are the institutions, the organizations which support them—one of which is the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. It's actually the organization which provides the structure and foundation for people being able to offer and share the teachings with so many. Just before we started, William and some of the staff at the study center said there were about 1,200 people on this call, which is amazing. But it took the organization of the staff at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies to put this on.

This is just by way of encouraging all of us to be supportive of the organizations that are really holding and serving as the container for the continuation of the teachings. I find it inspiring to see that happen. It would be wonderful for people to really understand the value of that and be supportive in whatever way is possible.

So feel free to close your eyes if you like. You can practice with the eyes open—just allow your gaze to be soft, whether your eyes are open or closed.

Just connecting with the felt sense of the body sitting. As if the entire body could be filled with mindfulness. Sati. Awareness.

Perhaps allowing your attention to rest on the sensations of breathing in the body. Or even sounds in your immediate environment. Just resting and receiving. Breath. Sounds. Breath or sound—this attentive knowing.

Taking a moment to appreciate any wholesome, beautiful qualities that arose for us during our time together. Perhaps patience. Truth-telling.

May all the wholesome energies that we've cultivated here together touch and be of benefit to everyone that we come in contact with in the days, weeks, and months to come.

May all beings everywhere, without exception, know safety and ease. Peace. May they know health and well-being. May they be able to care for themselves, come by the basic necessities of life with ease and happiness. May all beings everywhere be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

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