Questions & Responses

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:33:22

Welcome back, everyone. We'll begin this session also with a short meditation, about 15 minutes or so.

Find a comfortable sitting posture, however you are practicing. Again, soften the eyes and the jaw and the shoulders, relaxing into the body. I've been using that phrase, "there is a body," just to remind oneself to settle into the awareness of the whole body posture. Just sit and know you're sitting.

Within that framework—there is a body—be aware of what arises predominantly in the field of awareness. It might be sounds coming and going. It might be the sensations of the body breathing. Settle back in a very receptive mode.

Some people find it helpful to make a soft mental note or label, starting with "there is a body," or it could be "hearing," or "in and out" or "rise and fall" when feeling the breath. You can experiment to see if the noting is of help to you or not. Occasionally remind yourself with the phrase, "there is a body."

Within that larger frame, become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. You may become aware of other bodily sensations—tightness or pressure or vibration, warmth or coolness, heaviness, lightness. Become mindful of any bodily sensation that calls your attention. Open to it, feeling it.

Again, rest in the larger frame: there is a body.

Stay alert for the appearance of thoughts or images in the mind. A hearing note might be particularly helpful—just "thinking," or "seeing" if it's an image. In noting the thought, being mindful of it, we stay disentangled from it. See it just as another arising object in the open space of awareness.

By keeping the larger frame of "there is a body," it's sometimes easier within that frame to allow the breath to follow its own natural rhythm without any interference, pushing or pulling. The body knows how to breathe. We can just be settled back in the awareness of the whole body and simply be aware of the sensations of the body breathing all by itself.

Be mindful of any of the five hindrances that Bart talked about this morning. If any of them should arise and become predominant, be mindful, and the noting here would be very helpful. Just "wanting" or "desire" or "aversion," "anger," "sleepiness" or "dullness," "restlessness" or "doubt." Keep an eye out for the arising of those mind states. Note them, be with them, see how they too come and go.

When you're ready, you can gently open your eyes and become aware of the phenomenon of seeing. Maybe even make a mental note just to reinforce that awareness, that mindfulness, which we can then

carry out into the busyness of our days, periodically remembering to be mindful of seeing.

Thank you for sending in the many questions that you did. We probably won't be able to get to all of them because there were quite a few, but we'll go through as many as we can.

Before that, I have to make a little correction to something I said yesterday. I was talking about how the Buddha or practitioners would sometimes see different mind states arise and say, "Mara, I see you." I need to clarify that a little bit, and in order to do that, we have to take a little foray into Buddhist cosmology. Some of you may relate to this, others not, but it provides a context for the clarification.

Mara is used in two different ways. One way we use it—especially in contemporary Buddhist practice—is Mara as the embodiment of ignorance and delusion. When we see a defilement in the mind, we might say, "Oh, Mara, I see you." I do that a lot when I notice conceit arising in the mind. "Mara, I see you." And I'm always delighted, actually, because I'd much rather see it than not see it. There's actually a kind of joy or delight in that moment of mindfulness.

But the other meaning of Mara—and that's where it gets a little cosmological—is that Mara classically in the Buddhist texts is actually a being from the highest of the sensual heavens, and his main purpose in being is to keep people ensnared in the realm of sense pleasures. It's quite different from the Western notion of the devil. Here's this being who just wants to keep us enjoying ourselves in the realm of sense pleasures. He's always trying to dissuade practitioners from staying on the path, but he's really seen as one of these celestial beings that comes down and bothers people. And so then the Buddha or a practitioner would say, "O Mara, I see you."

The reason I wanted to make this clarification is that I believe yesterday I said when the Buddha or practitioners see defilements arise in their minds, they'll say, "Mara, I see you." But of course, for the Buddha and fully enlightened beings, the defilements have all been uprooted. Defilements do not arise in their minds. So when the Buddha or one of the great Arahants would use that phrase, it was referring to this being.

not to their own state of mind. So I just wanted to clarify that so we don't have the impression that the defilements are still arising in the mind of a fully awakened being. So now I feel like I've cleared up that little karmic knot.

So here we'll go to the questions that you sent in.

Would it be beneficial to review one's practice at the end of a sitting and also look back at how one has traveled throughout the day at the end of the day? If so, what would be the value and how can this be done?

I think it's a good idea—that kind of self-reflection, not in a heavy way and certainly not in a judgmental way. But just after a sitting, maybe reflecting: well, what just happened? Was my mind pretty

concentrated and mindful, or was it getting lost a lot? And if it was getting lost a lot, maybe reflect on what it was getting lost in. This just brings all of this to greater consciousness.

And at the end of the day, it might be good to reflect on how your day was spent. Were you frittering away time, as I was doing on my retreat occasionally? Or were you pretty focused in your day? You reflect a little: was anything unskillful done? When you look back—oh, maybe I responded with anger to someone, or there was a particularly noticeable manifestation of greed. Again, all without judgment. It's all just to bring these tendencies into the light.

And also reflect on the wholesome things, which is a very helpful thing to do because it really raises the good energy in our system. So if you were particularly generous or loving in some way, or of service—whatever it might be—it's just this reflection on the day, kind of assessing: oh, this one, maybe I could practice letting it go. Or: oh, this was good, maybe I should cultivate it a little more. I think it can be a useful thing to do.

My father is terminally ill with cancer and has a few months to live. How can I support him in this last period of life? He's not a Buddhist practitioner, but he's open and interested. How can I support myself in this very difficult period? Are there any specific teachings that are essential? How do you talk to a person who is dying?

This is a really meaningful question because at different times in our own lives, we may be with people who are dying, and it's also a reminder of our own mortality. We're all in the queue. So it's good, in a way, to get comfortable with that process, whether it's being with someone else or in our own process of dying when that happens.

That last question struck me particularly: how do you talk to a person who is dying? I would reframe it a bit—less about how do I talk to the person, and more emphasis on listening. As we're with somebody who's either very sick or dying, rather than jumping in and trying to be overly helpful, can we just enter into that space very softly and receptively, listening to where the person is at? Because people in that process will be in very different places; they'll be open or closed in very different ways. So before jumping in with our own agenda, I think it's really helpful just to be there—to be there in a loving way, listening, and really inviting the communication to come from your father, or whoever it may be. Then you get a feel for what's appropriate and what's not. Practicing listening skillfully would be a very skillful thing to do.

Generally, if and when it's appropriate in that space, the teachings suggest in some way or other reminding people of the good things they've done in their lives. Because as things come to mind in the dying process, there may be a whole life review. And as we know from our own minds, there can often be a tendency to focus on the negative. So in that very tender space—and again, it's not about making this a big project or trying to force anything—but in that listening space, if the opportunity presents itself, keep this in mind. Just having this person recall the beautiful things they've done in their life can be really

helpful.

There are people who have devoted their lives and careers to working with death and dying. One of the Insight Meditation teachers, Rodney Smith, used to be the director of the Seattle Hospice for many years—thirteen or fifteen years—and he wrote a very beautiful book called *Lessons from the Dying*. I would suggest it. It's really a lovely book. He recounts many of his experiences of being with people who are dying, the mistakes that are made, and what's helpful and skillful. That might be a good resource for you.

Since desire creates suffering, could you please talk about how to deal with ambition in the practice—ambitions of developing metta, of setting oneself free, of being enlightened?

So the desire for enlightenment—how do we reconcile this if craving or desire is the cause of suffering? Where does desire for wholesome things come in?

The problem here is not a real problem because it's more linguistic. In English, the word *desire* has many meanings.

We use the word desire in English in many different ways. One way involves clinging and greed and grasping—that's the desire and craving I was talking about yesterday, where there's that thirst for something in an unwholesome way, where there's a lot of clinging and grasping.

But another meaning of desire reflects a different mental quality entirely. In the Buddhist understanding, it has its own specific name in Pali: *chanda*, which is simply called "desire to do." That's the quality of motivation, the energy to do something, which in and of itself is ethically neutral. This energy to act could be associated with the wholesome or with the unwholesome, but it's that compelling energy to act.

So we could say, "Yes, there's a desire for enlightenment" or "a desire to become more compassionate." This is not the desire of craving or clinging—it's more the desire of aspiration. Simply changing the words we use in English will help settle the mind into the realization that these are two really different states. Even though we may use the same word, desire, one is the desire of clinging and grasping, and one is this desire that's simply an aspiration which sets the direction for us—going in the direction of awakening, or the direction of more compassion, or more loving-kindness.

Hopefully you can sense, even from the use of that word aspiration, the feeling of being settled back in the heart. It just leads us onward. The desire of craving, by contrast, is like we're leaning forward, holding on and grasping. So it's simply understanding the difference: even though at times we use the same word, it's being used in very different ways and reflecting different mind states.

The next question was interesting, about equanimity and how we understand it in a situation like we're in now with the pandemic.

Someone wrote: "I've recently answered questions from friends about equanimity in the face of what is going on in the world by saying things like 'equanimity can bring you closer to suffering and help with discernment.' But after hearing news stories about thousands who have had to flee their homes, becoming refugees, and all the massive suffering involved worldwide with this pandemic, somehow there was doubt: How can one be equanimous with that level of suffering?"

Here it's important to really dive into the understanding of this mind state of equanimity and why it's so powerful even in situations of tremendous suffering in the world. Equanimity serves as a counterbalance to two opposing tendencies that could easily arise as we engage with the reality of suffering around us.

The first unskillful tendency is indifference. Because of technology, we're so aware of global suffering, and it can feel like too much. We think, "I can't deal with it all," and perhaps, "There's not much I can do about it." So we pull back, and in a way we settle into some flavor of indifference. That's not a skillful response.

On the other side, as we take in the news and the reality of all this suffering, some people find themselves overwhelmed by sorrow. The mind gets overwhelmed because it's so vast and it's not clear what to do. We're drowning in the sorrow that arises. That's not helpful either.

Equanimity is that space which is neither indifferent nor drowning in sorrow. We could call it spaciousness of mind—mind like space, which can hold everything. It doesn't pull back out of aversion, and it doesn't drown in what's happening. From that space of equanimity, where the mind is not reactive—not leading to indifference or overwhelm—we're in a place of balance.

Then something becomes possible, and this phrase can serve as a guide for us as we navigate these situations: Can we be responsive rather than reactive? Instead of that initial reaction to the magnitude of suffering, and then getting caught up in our own reactivity one way or another, with equanimity we take it in. We're open to it, we feel it. And from that place of balance, we can respond in whatever way is possible, whatever way is appropriate in the moment.

Sometimes there's not much we can do, and we simply want to develop a heart that's open to the suffering, feeling compassion for it. Sometimes there are things we can do—through acts of generosity, through acts of kindness. Equanimity gives us that inner balance and inner space to actually hold it all. We're not pulling away from it and we're not drowning in it. We're holding it in this open space of mind, allowing for compassionate responsiveness to emerge. And we simply see how that can manifest.

I think this is a really important area to explore for yourselves, because equanimity doesn't stir people the way qualities like love and compassion and peace do. We don't hear much about equanimity.

It's not in the news much. And yet, it is this powerful balancing force in the mind. That's why the Buddha included it in the four Brahma Viharas, the four boundless states, which I will be talking more about tomorrow. So I would really encourage you to explore in yourselves what this quality of equanimity is like—this quality of balance, its openness, its non-reactivity, this connectedness. And the possibility for

responsiveness that comes from it.

There was a question about walking practice. Someone wrote: "Most of the time I feel kind of anxious doing the walking practice. I feel an unpleasant squeeze on my chest and the breath is not full. Usually I do walking with noticing and naming the different phases of each step. Today, inspired by Bart's student who imagined salsa dancing, I just let go of the naming and the differentiation of each step and let the body walk in a smooth way, almost like a dance. I noticed the squeeze less strong, and I noticed a pleasant feeling." But then the question goes on: "I'm wondering, is this just aversion to what I was feeling, or is this a skillful thing to do?"

First, I want to put in a plug for the walking meditation, because often people think of the walking as kind of second-tier meditation—the real meditation is sitting, and walking is what you do during recess, in the in-between times. This is not a wise way of looking at it. Over the years I've found that as much insight comes in the walking as in the sitting. It's a very important part of the practice. And it's the practice which in some ways carries over the most into our lives, because the more you do walking meditation, after a while being mindful of the body moving becomes the default. That becomes the default setting of the mind, just out of habit. If we've done a lot of walking meditation, then in your life—walking down the street or in your apartment or house from room to room—automatically the mind will drop into being mindful. So it's a powerful way of integrating mindfulness into one's life, as well as really opening up profound understandings. All of this is just a plug to keep doing the walking meditation.

However, we want to do it skillfully. From the tone of the question, I had the sense that at first maybe there was a little too much over-efforting, trying to be too precise in the naming and the feeling of each different part of each step. This could be done in a very relaxed way, but it could also be done with a little too much efforting, which might have caused those unpleasant physical sensations. So first, to say it is fine to just imagine yourself salsa dancing for a while, as a way to counteract any tendency to over-effort or get a little tight.

Even watching one's posture—do you feel like you're kind of bent over and looking at the walking, the movement? This is actually quite common. But really, being mindful of the movement has nothing to do with seeing it. In fact, I would recommend particularly not looking at the foot or leg. Keep the gaze a little way ahead.

There's a reframe of our understanding of how we're doing the practice, and of what mindfulness means, particularly in walking and in movement. A lot of the meditative language we use around mindfulness involves words like watching or noticing. It's all suggestive of looking at something. At different times that might be helpful, but it's really not helpful in the walking at all.

I discovered something quite early on in my practice which made a huge difference. It made the walking go from being effortful to delightful. And that is simply changing the language I was framing it with. Instead of having the notion of watching—even if one is not actually looking at the foot or leg, there could

still be that sense of kind of being up in the head somehow, and the attention is being directed from there, as if we were watching the movement. So change the language from watching to feeling. Feel the movement. Feel the touch. Because when we're feeling it, that's from the inside. That's not being up here in the head looking at anything. We're in the body, simply feeling it move.

Just as a little experiment right now, if you like, move your arm back and forth. Watching it—I'm going to exaggerate a bit—would be like this, like we're really intent on not losing it, on tracking it. Now just move your arm back and simply feel it. It could be like a dance. You can move in any way and you're simply feeling the movement. It becomes effortless.

I would suggest that you certainly continue with the walking practice because it's so valuable. But see if you can make this shift from watching to feeling. I think you'll find the whole system relaxes in that.

One person asked about having attention deficit disorder and finding it very hard to maintain focus during talks or meditation. They wondered how they could accept this with equanimity and still meditate, noting how difficult it is not to blame oneself and thereby strengthen wrong view and conceit.

A few things come to mind here. One is practicing a kind of open awareness rather than trying to have a directed awareness where you're attempting to stay on a single object. See what happens if you just settle back in an open awareness, trying to be mindful of whatever it is that's arising, even if the mind is jumping around a lot. Moment after moment, what are you aware of? It might be a sound, it might be a thought, it might be a sensation, it might be a breath. The mind does not have to stay, particularly in vipassana, on a single object. You can relax back and just be mindful of what is arising in your mind-body process, however it is. Moment after moment, you just acknowledge: there's this, there's this, there's this. It may be lots of thoughts, or the mind might seem to jump from sound to thought to sensation—that's fine if you're simply settled back and acknowledging in each moment what's present. So that's one thing I would try, and see if it actually helps you relax into the experience of what is going on.

From another angle, if you wanted to see if there's a way of actually strengthening the ability to stay concentrated in a more sustained way on a particular object, one approach you might try—and I've found this very helpful in general, but it may be specifically useful for what you're asking—relates to the walking meditation.

Sometimes people have the idea, suppose they have a pathway ten steps in length, that they're going to be mindful for these ten steps, this whole path of walking. That's way too much. Even to have the intention of being mindful for five steps is too much. How about, as we're doing the walking meditation, you just have the intention: can I feel—again, feeling rather than watching—can I feel one step? That's all. One step. And then you stop. One step. Did it. Okay, one more step. Okay, I could do that. Stop. Don't try to link them up. Just one step, one step, one step.

Doing it one step at a time may well be within your capacity, even with attention deficit disorder. You

might see that you can stay attentive for the duration of one step. Well, that's all you need to do, because we're ever only taking one step at a time. But we get ahead of ourselves in our minds. We have these expectations of something—not only for you, but for most people—beyond their capacity. And so then we get frustrated or self-judgmental or whatever. One step.

You could do the same thing in sitting meditation. One breath. Not even one breath—one in-breath. That's all. Well, don't hold the in-breath too long; you're going to have to out-breath. One in-breath, one out-breath. But I think you get the picture. You might try that, and it might also help. So this combination of open awareness—just noticing whatever it is, even if they're quickly changing objects—or one step, one breath.

The next question opens up a whole big discussion. It was prefaced with words that I think are the most commonly used in questions that arise on meditation retreats: "If there is no self, then..." Because this is a big question for people. This idea of no self, unlike impermanence or even suffering or discontent—those we can easily relate to.

But no self, non-self—what does that mean? If it's not totally clear to you, that's fine. This is a counterintuitive teaching with profound implications for our freedom. You hear the teachings about it, reflect on it, let it sit, let it germinate. More questions arise, and all of that's fine because that's how slowly, gradually, we come to understand it.

So the question continues: if there is no self and my body doesn't belong to me, then am I just a collection of atoms in the form of a body belonging to no one? How do we reconcile living in a world that fixates so heavily on the sense of self—I, you, we, and they—with the knowledge that none of it is real? Basically, if there's no self, what does that mean for how we live in the world, which seems to revolve around being itself?

There's one framework in the teachings that is very helpful here, and it also relates to a deeper understanding of right and wrong view, which I'll get to in another question. The frame that can be really helpful, which is found in the teachings, is the frame of two levels of truth: relative truth and more ultimate truth. Or we could say conventional reality and more ultimate reality.

Just as an example of what that means in real life, imagine holding a glass or a cup. The cup is real. We're holding it. We use it. We drink from it. So it's definitely real—it's not a figment of our imagination. But on another level, if we looked at glass through a high-power microscope, glass would disappear. A cup would disappear. Then we would be on that level of just atoms and molecules. On that level, there is no cup. There is no glass. So the question in our lives is how do we integrate this understanding of the more ultimate level and also the relative level?

This is important to do. It reminded me of when I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's awakening. I was staying at the Burmese rest house where a lot of the Western practitioners

were staying. In Bodh Gaya, one of the big landowners had a working elephant—really working. Sometimes when we'd be walking into the village, the elephant would be coming the other way. Well, I didn't stay in the level of ultimate truth thinking, "Oh, that's just atoms and molecules. The elephant is mostly empty space." No, I moved out of the way. The elephant was a lot bigger than I was. So we need to engage on the relative level, the conventional level.

On that level, even using terms like I and you and we and they, using them as conventional designations, is totally fine. However, to the degree that through our practice we have experiences of the more ultimate level—where we really do see the body as being nothing solid—we may not be seeing it as atoms, but we can certainly feel it as just an energy flow of what we could say are minute particles, where there is no solidity at all and the form of the body has completely disappeared. We're getting a taste of what that more ultimate level of selflessness means. On that level, there is no self. There is no solid body. There is no solid being. Even though on the conventional level, the relative level, we use those concepts.

But this is the important point: the more grounded we are, the more experience we have of the ultimate level—that is, the momentariness of all phenomena, that really this mind-body process and the whole world is just a flow of momentary arisings and passings—but usually we're not seeing it on that level of perception. We're seeing it on the level of "this is a glass, this is a cup." But the more experience we have, mostly through our meditation, of this more ultimate level, then we operate on the relative level with much less attachment and clinging. Because we know deeply, and we know from our own experience, that everything we're relating to on a conventional level looks very different on this more ultimate level. It's not as solid as we think.

So the implication of our insight into impermanence and into emptiness of self that happens on the deeper level then gets translated into the way we're relating in this conventional world—but we're relating from a much freer place. We don't get seduced quite so much by attachment and craving and clinging and conceit. This is how they work together. They're not in conflict.

They're just two different levels of perception.

Just one last point on this. Whether we're thinking of it in terms of our own mind-body or just the example of the glass and the cup, it's important to understand that this relative and more ultimate level of truth is a union. It's not that the relative level is here and the ultimate level is somewhere else. It's just the cup. It's just this mind-body. It depends what level of perception, what refinement of perception we bring to it. From one level, it looks like a cup. On another level, no cup—it's just atoms and electrons. We want to understand that in a way, there's one reality, not two different realities, but they're seen from different levels. And that's what makes freedom in the relative world possible, because we understand that this very same experience we're having on one level can be seen from a whole other perspective—a perspective that frees us as we navigate the relative world.

So this is a question that probably we all face at different times: "I live in a community and neighborhood

where there's a lot of fighting, greed, and delusion. This stimulates much aversion, fear, and grief within me. I want to push it away, get away from it. Unfortunately, I don't have the finances to move or to live in a different place. I have to learn to relate to what is around me in a skillful way. What can you suggest?"

Even though the situation described may be a little bit on the extreme edge of challenging circumstances, I think all of us find ourselves at different times in our lives in environments that are not conducive to well-being. So the first thing that's really important is to practice being mindful of your own reactions in the mind—basically, the hindrances. You say it stimulates much aversion and fear and grief within you. Those mind states are your responsibility, because how you're relating to them is not dependent on what anybody else is doing or not doing. The external conditions may be the cause for these states to arise, but they have no power at all to determine how you relate to the grief or the anger or the aversion. That's completely one hundred percent your responsibility.

Understanding this is very empowering. We don't feel victimized by circumstances. We're not thinking, "They're making me feel a certain way." It's true they may be the cause for these feelings to arise, but are we identified with these states or not? Are we condemning these states or not? This is really important because we often don't see how the way we relate to unwholesome mind states can actually be feeding them.

How do we feed these unwholesome mind states? We feed them in two ways. First, we feed them by being totally lost and identified with them. "I'm so angry" or "I'm so afraid" or "I'm so grieving"—whatever it is. That identification really empowers those states within us and makes them stronger. But another way we feed these unwholesome mind states is through aversion towards them. "I hate this. I want this to go away." That aversion towards them actually strengthens them. This is not always immediately obvious, so I would suggest you really look at it.

Then, in understanding all of this, come back to your practice where you're including the grief, the fear, the aversion. They are mind states arising in the mind, and they become objects of your meditation. You want to be mindful of them so you're not getting lost and carried away by them, and you're not condemning them. It's equanimity—developing that quality of space. "Oh, this is aversion. Aversion feels like this. Fear feels like this."

Grief feels like this. Bringing that quality of mindfulness and investigation to these very mind states is really important because it will unhook you from an unnecessary level of suffering. You can't necessarily control what's happening in the environment, but you can influence how you are relating to what's arising in your own mind—relating either in a way that just creates more suffering for yourself, or in a way that actually brings about some insight into the mind, into these states themselves. And in not being caught by them, you will notice that they pass through much more quickly.

This is not a magic thing where they're never going to arise again. But you have learned to deal with them much more skillfully. So you don't get stuck in them. They become like passing clouds—difficult, stormy

clouds passing through. Not so much of a problem.

This is the foundation for beginning your work in such a situation. Then, once you feel that you've come to some place of non-reactivity, or someplace of greater peace, it becomes a very interesting question: Is there a way of relating to the people in the environment who are doing these really unskillful or harmful things? As a way of perhaps short-circuiting that move to aversion and grief and fear that had been conditioning your mind, once you have established some place of inner balance or some little bit of equanimity, it might be interesting—as you're seeing people behave in unskillful ways—instead of focusing on the personality or even the behavior, which calls up all these emotions, to really focus on the suffering that is there causing those harmful actions.

People who are happy generally don't go around hurting other people. That kind of unskillful behavior usually comes out of a place of suffering. And if we can tune into that, sometimes it's very visible. If we stop and really look at a person as they're doing something not skillful, very often we can see the suffering underneath it. Or we can just be aware of it in a more general way.

By focusing on the suffering, it's possible to actually have their behavior be the cause of compassion arising in you, rather than fear or aversion or grief. Because you see the suffering in them and the suffering they may be causing. You see the suffering of the whole situation. And coming close to suffering, being open to suffering, is the cause for compassion to arise—when we can take it in with equanimity, when we don't fight against it, when we're not having aversion to it. It's like, "Oh yes, there's a lot of suffering here."

This is so interesting because it's a very complex situation, but it's so rich. This is a great practice opportunity. It would really be interesting, to the degree that you can work with this and develop it to some extent, to notice—if you have any relationship with any of these people in your environment—whether people start responding to you differently when you are coming from a place of compassion rather than judgment or anger or aversion or fear. People respond to our energy. Is what we're putting out just adding to the problem, or are we stepping outside of the problem and coming to it from a very different mindset?

I'll just tell you one little anecdote. This has to do with our teacher Dipa Ma, who many of you may have heard of. She was this amazing woman in Calcutta—profound practice in both all the concentration practices and all the powers of mind that can be developed, as well as stages of enlightenment. At one point, somebody asked her what was in her mind, and she said, "Peace, concentration, and love." That's quite a mind.

She lived in a very poor section of Calcutta—we would probably call it a tenement. Very, very poor. There was an apartment building around a courtyard, and the apartments were all open to this courtyard. In India, the doors are always open. Dipa Ma told us that when she first moved in there, everybody in the building was fighting—a lot of aggression and screaming. It sounds a little bit like the environment that

was described. But her presence in the building, she said, over time—it took some time—but the fact that she was this one being who only had love and concentration and peace in her heart and mind, that vibration started to permeate the whole apartment building. She said that over time, first people started coming to her for advice and for teachings, but the whole environment of that apartment building changed because of how she was.

We may not yet be at the level of Dipa Ma, but we can track in that direction and just see what kind of influence we can have through our being, if we have come to some place of repose, of ease in the situation. It's challenging—there's no doubt about that. But I would really take it on as a situation of interest. How can I investigate this, both in terms of how I'm relating to my own mind and then what I'm bringing to the mix of the environment?

There were quite a number of questions—the same question that a number of you asked—to see if I could further differentiate conceit and wrong view. It wasn't so clear what necessarily the difference was.

I can get very excited talking about the Dharma, so let me just settle back for a moment.

As a preface to this discussion, just as with the example of the cup and how we can either see it as a cup or at a deeper level as just electrons and atoms, so too with these different experiences like conceit or wrong view—there are many different levels at which we could explore them. I was going for a middle level. The most superficial level would be just the conceptual, a kind of definition. The middle level that I was trying to engage was to understand the concepts, but also to explore how do we feel them, how do we experience them in our practice. That's what I was aiming for.

There is a deeper level, which is gone into in tremendous detail in the Buddhist psychology called the Abhidhamma—this super detailed analysis of all the different states and kinds of consciousness, all the different mental factors, and how they combine and relate in different ways. That would be like going to the subatomic particle level. I didn't go to that level because I don't know about it. I'm not an Abhidhamma scholar. And for me, even though it's really interesting, we don't need that level of detail in order to understand how these three proliferating tendencies function.

I wanted to say this because conceit, wrong view, and craving never operate alone in our minds. They're operating in conjunction with other mental factors. If you were interested, either through your own study or through going to a teacher who was really an expert in the Abhidhamma, you could explore the relationship of all these different mental factors. But as I said, that's not my area of expertise—I haven't really studied it in detail. So I'm talking about just this mid-level understanding.

Wrong view is really a belief. Conceit and craving, in the way we experience them, are more embodied experiences. When we're identified with some sense of "I" or "I am," or with craving, there's something quite tangible in our experience that we can recognize when we're "I am-ing" or wanting or thirsting for something. Whereas with wrong view, it's not so much that felt experience—it's the underlying belief

about something.

The reason this is so important requires me to talk about another framework for a moment. Beliefs, strongly held beliefs, are extremely difficult to dislodge. The Buddha talked about three distortions of our understanding—or three hallucinations. The first is hallucination or distortion of perception. The second is distortion or hallucination of mind. And the third is distortion or hallucination of view.

Distortion of perception is where we're simply misperceiving something. You're outside, you see a stick on the ground, you think it's a snake. We're just misperceiving. Well, that's fairly easily remedied. We just take a closer look and see, "Yeah, that's not a snake, it's a stick." But this happens a lot in different ways.

Distortions of mind are everything that happens in our minds based on the distortion of perception. We think it's a snake and then maybe we get afraid or interested, whatever. All of those mind states are distortions of mind based on the misperception. That too is not so hard to work through, because once we see clearly, our mind understands in an accurate way.

But distortion of view—when people hold a strong view, it doesn't matter what the evidence is. People can be so attached to the view that you could present the clearest evidence in the world and it's not going to make any difference. That's why view is very deep.

We see this a lot. For example, there are many people who simply refuse to believe in evolution, even though there's tremendous, overwhelming scientific evidence for it. You can present this evidence, but if people are holding some contrary view, the evidence is not going to make any difference. They're not going to give up that view. In politics, we see it a lot.

He said there's right view associated with taints or defilements, and right view which is not—which is tending towards liberation. So first, that first concept: I wouldn't have put those two together. Right view, but still with desire or greed? But the Buddha was pointing out that yes, when we're living in this conventional world—the world of being, just the way of our normal lives—right view is understanding what actions bring about happiness. We talk about, "Oh yes, if you practice generosity, if you practice loving-kindness, this is going to bring about different kinds of happiness for you." So it's very worldly, and it could even be that on this level, right view associated with taints, we might be practicing generosity in order to have the abundance that comes from it, karmically. Do you understand? So there is craving involved, there's desire, but it's right view in terms of understanding the cause and effect. Yes, generosity brings abundance. Loving-kindness brings good relationships. There is a cause and effect. So this is right view connected still to our mundane, conventional, relative world.

And then there's the right view concerned with liberation. So just to use that example of generosity: practicing while wanting the result of it—that's the first kind of right view. But if we practice generosity understanding and really seeing that in the moment of generosity, that's a moment of non-clinging, and that's why we're practicing it—as a vehicle for non-clinging—so that's the right view that leads to

liberation. So you're just getting some idea of these mind states: right view and wrong view, likewise conceit and craving. There's a lot of richness to them that I didn't go into yesterday, but you might explore on your own if you're interested.

So again, just to encapsulate: wrong view or right view is a belief, and this belief can be very deep within us. The belief is either in accordance with the Dhamma, with the truth, or it's not—which then becomes wrong view, wrong belief. Craving is that embodied, felt sense of thirsting for or wanting something. We can feel it. And the same thing with conceit. Just some of the examples I gave yesterday: when I was feeling down on myself for having wasted some time, that conceit had a visceral feeling to it and it affected my mood. In that way, it was very tangible. It wasn't just a belief—it was something deeply felt.

One more little point in this. It's like every question can become a whole hour Dhamma talk. But what's interesting to me is that this path of awakening happens in stages. Within our tradition, it's said that enlightenment happens in four stages, and the first stage of awakening is called stream entry, or entering the stream leading to enlightenment.

Wrong view is uprooted at this first stage of awakening, because we've gone beyond—we've had that experience of the unconditioned, of nibbāna, going beyond this mind-body process. And so we see completely clearly that this mind-body process is not self, out of that experience. That is the big transformation that happens in that moment: the understanding of selflessness. So wrong view is uprooted; it doesn't arise again in the stream of our consciousness.

However, craving is not uprooted until the third stage of awakening, and conceit is not uprooted until the fourth and final stage of awakening. So this gets interesting. Even though conceit is all around "I am," if we have seen through the wrong view of self, even though the habit pattern of the comparing mind, for example—

That habit pattern is deep and will continue all the way to full enlightenment. But after we have seen into the truth of selflessness, we no longer take the "I am-ing" to be self. We just see, "Oh yes, this is simply a habit pattern of the mind that is very deep. It's going to be with us for quite a while." But it has lost its power—we've cut the root of it. Because we no longer take it to be self, it will be dying on the vine. It may take a while; we'll need to progress further along the path. But inevitably, we will be freeing ourselves from it, because we've cut the root of that belief: "This is me, this is I."

Craving works the same way. Craving is a pattern in the mind. It's a habit. Conceit is a habit. Craving is a habit. And these habits continue even once we understand the selfless nature of it all. So perhaps this has helped to distinguish between wrong and right view on one hand, and conceit and craving on the other.

There was one question which comes up frequently in different forms, something I've talked about many times. The question was essentially: "I'm still grappling with the concept that there is no self." Not surprising—many of us grapple with this notion. What does non-self mean?

We want to understand that words like "self" or "I" are designations for something. They are not existing things in themselves. Let me give you an example. Imagine a river. Someone asks, "What's a river?" You say, "Well, it's the flowing water in a certain configuration—a certain pattern." The word "river" is a designation for that flowing stream of water. It's not that the river is something apart from that. It's not that the river is a thing in and of itself to which the water belongs. It's simply a designation for that flowing water.

Self is a designation for this flowing stream of mind-body phenomena. We could use that term, and we could say, "Yes, there is a self," if we understand what's meant by it. This flowing of mind-body elements appears in a recognizable pattern. I get up in the morning, I look in the mirror, and I recognize who it is. It's not some chaotic mishmash of stuff. There's a recognizable pattern to the flow of changing elements. But it's not that this mind-body process belongs to a self. The word "self" or "Joseph" or "I"—it's just a word designating this flow of changing phenomena.

To say there's no self doesn't mean that nothing exists. It's still the same flow of mental and physical phenomena. It's not that we say "no self" and suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke. Everything remains exactly the same, except that we're seeing it clearly. We're not confusing the designation with the actual reality of experience—whether it's the flowing water of the river or the flowing movement of the mind-body process. That is the reality of what's happening, regardless of what it's called. We don't want to confuse terminology, a mere designation, for being a thing in itself. That is what non-self means.

So we don't lose anything. In seeing no self and understanding that, everything is just as it always was, but we're seeing it more clearly. We're not adding this wrong view that this mind-body process belongs to me.

I hope you understand that this whole notion of understanding selflessness may be easier than you think—if you understand actually what selflessness means. We can have all kinds of ideas, conjuring up different things about what no self means, and then we sometimes panic about it. I hope this was clear. That term "self" or "Joseph"—it's just a designation. It's not something in and of itself.

When we see that, our whole practice comes into harmony with understanding the laws governing the process of unfolding. This is what the Buddha pointed out. He said that in this unfolding process, some elements, some qualities lead to more suffering, while some qualities lead to greater happiness and peace. He simply pointed all this out. He said, "What would you like? Do you want more suffering, or would you like peace?" When we pose it that way, it seems fairly obvious.

Somebody made this comment—I'm trying to remember. It was expressed very beautifully. This is not exact, but it captures the essence of it: "People shrink from suffering, but love its causes." We find ourselves in that situation. None of us want to suffer, and yet we keep doing things out of ignorance that cause suffering.

This is the great gift of the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha simply pointed this out because he saw with

such profound clarity what leads to what. In seeing that and learning about it, there can be the cultivation of wholesome qualities and the slow abandoning of unwholesome ones. All of this can be done without any notion of a reified self. It's simply understanding the laws governing the unfolding process.

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